THE RED CORD

THOMAS GRANT SPRINGER

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THE RED CORD

A Romance of China

BY

THOMAS GRANT SPRINGER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

JOHN LUTHER LONG

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

S. Y. PANG

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To

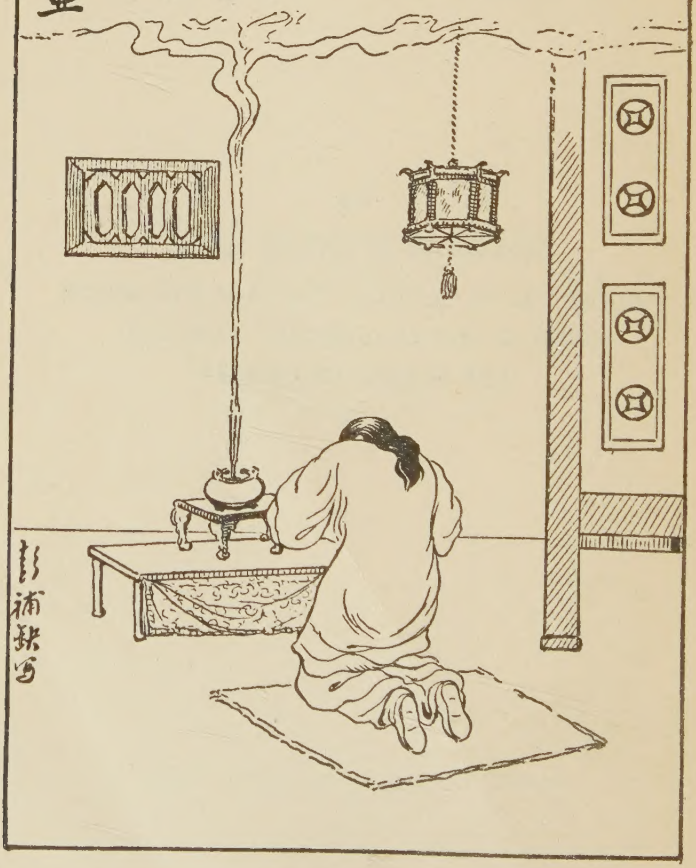
WILLIAM STANLEY HILL

WHOSE FAITH CARRIED "THE FOUR PRECIOUS THINGS OF THE LIBRARY" THROUGH "THE FOREST OF PENCILS"

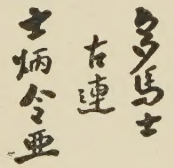
THE KOWTOW AND THE PRAYER

BY

多馬士古連士炳令亞



Oh, Kwan Yam, Goddess of Mercy, and All Compassionate One, I prostrate myself before you, knowing that you will stretch the sleeve of your tolerance, making a kindly shade, on the liberties I have taken with, and in, your Holy Name!



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ANAGACHI

(*Which means nothing worse than not necessarily!*)

For I appreciate that you may wish to plunge into the story—though an Oriental romance should not be read on the run.

Besides, there is the important matter of atmosphere which has, in a way, been solemnly intrusted to me. And if you were but aware of the cunning of authors to woo you into the atmosphere . . .! I knew an Oriental play once in which we used the subtle incense of the East (through the heater tubes!) So, if I do not keep you unnecessarily, you may not curse me, while, if I do, I agree that you may fly to the story and leave my atmosphere—yes, and me!—to hang.

For you must know, too, that you will presently be dealing with a poet as well as a story-teller, one who writes in the flowery metaphors of the flowery East. And I wish you to get the lotus, the iris, the tea-rose into your nostrils and your eyes—to say nothing of the something inside of you where they will score greatest.

Also, it will be good for you to get away from the automatic and the dagger for a couple of hundred pages, just to prove to yourself that we are not as far advanced in our decadence as some of us

think. Come! Back to the days of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo! For East is West and West is East, and surely the twain *shall* meet—the moment the West puts out its hand for that of the East—everlastingly out! Now, even from age-old Gobi reaching from our very earth-birth!

What treasures the East has for us where gold is not permitted to be digged from the earth lest less of its yellow sand shall reach waters! It is entirely possible that the gifts which the Wise Men brought from the East to the infant Jesus came from the Forbidden City—where even the outsides of the houses are jeweled!

Forget, then, by the help of the Merciful One, Kwan Yam, for the time you shall read here, the motor, the concrete road, the airplane, the radio, the lipstick, the powder puff—and ride with Genghis Khan!

Of course, you've got to come back to where life and all its littlenesses are preserved by physicians and not by the incanted gods; but you will have been on an enchanted journey where the wicked cease not from troubling, nor are the weary ever at rest. You will have seen people who were polite when we were savages. Whose Congress, if they had one, would rather have committed the happy dispatch en masse than have slapped the face of an enemy—as ours did that of a friend.

Oh, yes, enemies must be killed—and a few malefactors—but politely.

Yet I shall not let atmosphere keep you long from the story. And so—a word more—and then . . .

In "The Red Cord" Mr. Springer has given us a veritable Oriental Main Street—or, better still, the "public square" of a Chinese village. Its irregular sides are occupied by the *hong* of So Ling Gee, the umbrella of lovable old Wang Ho, the star-gazer (who does not always transmit the counsel of the gods he represents, but often his own very human wishes), the yellow river, the temple of Kwan Yam, Goddess of Mercy (and many other things), whose wide sleeve protects the village even as the eagle her brood. She is one of the story-people, and she, too, must often have had trouble in the councils of the gods on the Floating Bridge of Heaven because of her love for the weaknesses of her human friends.

In this alluring enclosure Mr. Springer moves for us a pageant which none but a born Orientalist could fashion. For he wisely chose a village which no foot of a west-ocean barbarian has ever trod. Before Sun Yat Sen was heard of, and before the republic came to embarrass forever the Oriental mind. For one of the protagonists in the story is Yet Hing Chow, mandarin, who comes as the shadow of the Son of Heaven to rule the district—and practise bad law and worse morals in a truly and sincerely Oriental fashion! He is one who lies continuously, convincingly and effectively!

Here, in this delectable public square, wherein is the dust, the shouting, the smells, the heat, the creaking of the water-buffalo carts, the wordy malingerers and shadow-loafers, the high-and-mighty, the author has limned his picture with, alas! no thought of the bored lady who reads two novels between New York and Philadelphia.

And of these story-people, I confess that next to So Wo Loie herself, old Wang Ho, the fortune-teller, intrigues me most. Subtlety, humor, kindliness, Humanity (with a capital) gleam always through his round eyed spectacles. I should have been glad to create old Wang Ho, and shall hope to meet him again. He is standardized and concentrated Old China. (Not for the table!) He handles the Kitchen Gods with the same care and felicity with which he manages the gods of life!

And it is the reactions of these—So Ling Gee, the rich *hong* keeper; Ho Fah Lee, the Lochinvar out of the Chinese West come to carry off So Wo Loie on his junk; Wang Ho, So Fi (the Mean One), Yet Hing Chow, the Goddess of Mercy, etcetera—which make the story a most enticing potpourri of braves, lovers and thieves!

Of course, there is the sex-motive. No story of the Orient, with its worship of sex and the children which it promises, the despair of the woman who has them not, her sex-outcasting, the shame of her, could possibly be true without it. It is not a hidden lure to be ashamed of in the East, but a thing

to be shouted aloud, to be bought and sold publicly.

Birth control was treated badly in its penetration of the East. It is a wonder its missionaries were not burned alive. But they were only laughed at. They the East did not understand. Was it a joke concerning the greatest thing in the world?—they had heard that Americans did joke about sacred things.

So, in this Oriental public square, the author puts the feet of Sex foremost—both of 'em! Of course, in a land where Nothing is given for Nothing it is subject to barter and sale—So Wo Loie, with her tea-rose cheeks, and the lotuses before her ears, is sold again and again, simply—because—Ho Fah Lee, the bold sailor from the Outside Kingdom, buys her with two *piculs* of rice—to keep her family from starvation. So Ling Gee buys her with a few strings of cash—for his ailing son, from whom he wishes an heir before he dies. And as her cheeks flame, and the lotuses beside them grow larger and redder, her price rises, and Yet Hing Chow, mandarin, and shadow of the Son of Heaven, buys her—for his harem—with ingots of silver! And for the same reason—because! Her flaming cheeks, her round neck, the resilient touch of her arms!

So, of course, the *yamen* is also here! But what story of the East could be without it? And, after all, doesn't all this happen on Fifth Avenue? And quite as openly? Even more so? The purchase of a numbered wife or merely a numberless woman

for the inner apartments is never chronicled in the Chinese newspapers! *De gustibus non est disputandum!*

In "The Red Cord" the author treats the matter of sex highly, as did Homer and Virgil. Even the mandarin buys So Wo Loie because she is the flower of a coolie breed and thus somewhat more intoxicating than the cultivated garden flowers he knows. She is to perfume and ornament his *yamen* as do the flowers in his koro. She is to be as the kakemono on the walls—in golden raiment, jewels, smiles, poses! That's all! Maybe!

This story, to my sense (and with the grand kowtow to the hurdlers of best traditional sellers!), is not one to be read in the brief and breathless hour before going to bed, but slothfully, rolling beneath one's tongue the last delight while anticipating another.

And so, to speak Orientally, behold, Honorable Ones! Before you I break my miserable bones. Humbly I take my leave. Arigato. Gomen nasai.

JOHN LUTHER LONG.

The Ninth Day of the Seventh Moon
The Thirteenth Year of the Republic.

THE RED CORD

THERE WAS A GREAT FAMINE IN THE COUNTRY AND MANY PEOPLE WERE PERISHING OF HUNGER

是時值大饑荒
人民不免有
死亡者

餓神

彭補缺写

GOD OF HUNGER

THE RED CORD

FAMINE

"AI, ai ai, ai!"

From within the sun-baked, wattle hut the wailing monotony of suffering motherhood stole out in echoing cadence to the shimmering, drouth parched plain. Wo Fat, listlessly sitting before the hut, sunk in the apathy of woe, accepted his common lot with the philosophic calm of his race.

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

The shrill falsetto of his wife's voice continued with the monotony of the whine of water wheels in the time of irrigation. But now they were silent, the river having sunk too low in its bed to permit them to lift the moisture to the parched, cracked soil. Wo Fat eyed them with dumb despair, apparently unconscious of the chant of death that orchestrated the departure of the flower of his house, his only son, fading at the dry breast of his mother, mouthing the hot, empty nipples that mocked his starving lips.

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

The weak wailing of the child was drowned in

the monotonous chant. Wo Fat gave no heed to it. There was no succor he could offer. Behind the hut the sunken rice paddy was criss-crossed with heat cracks, for the shoots had dried before the rice could lift its green head above the second flooding. The river below showed wide reaches of sand bars, like the grinning teeth of a dry skull. Far out over those shimmering stretches the sluggish stream crawled, mocking the land that it had shrunk away from. And somewhere beyond the dim tops of the distant mountains, all but lost in the dancing heat waves, the Rain God slept, heedless of the wailing of his children, the black haired people of the plain.

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

Wo Fat's ears were apparently dumb to it. His wrinkled face, as dry and withered as the burnt plain itself, was as despairingly expressionless. His dull eyes, like glazed agate, stared unseeing across the bars below to his buffalo making himself a sand wallow at the water's edge since there was no mud for him to loll in. Wo Fat had all but killed it and himself tramping the sand between the river and the bank, seeking to bring enough moisture for even garden truck, but the sun had drunk it from the hot soil before it was more than a rapidly drying stain.

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

Wo Fat's eyes turned dully at another sound. From the village down the river came the faint popping of firecrackers, the distance-dulled beating

of gongs, the squealing of reed pipes, that told of the empty rites of the villagers before the temple of Kwan Yam, Goddess of Mercy, whose ears seemed deafened by the drouth to their prayers. What heed then had she of that tireless mother chant within?

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

For an instant it left off while the distracted mother squeezed her dry breasts, only to have them yield the salty, torturing mockery of perspiration to the weakly wailing mouth, whose inarticulate pleading plunged her maternal soul into the Seventh Hell of misery. She had given life, now she could not sustain it with the poor body that was racked with pains more cutting than those of the labor that had brought that life only to this slow, torturing death. The flower of ancestral hope withered on the scorching breast of drouth.

From behind the hut, slinking in from the raised paddy trail, a slim but sturdy figure crouched in the meagre shadow of the wall. She paid no attention to the wailing voice. She gave no heed to her father sitting like a dull statue on the barrow handle. In her hand, grasped in a claw-like grip, she held an all but dry piece of sugar cane, dropped by some passing traveler moving out of the unhappy region. Her sharp, white teeth began worrying and tearing at the dry stalk, shredding it while she sucked and mouthed it noisily, seeking some substance in its unyielding toughness. At

least it seasoned the saliva of her effort, and her tortured palate counterfeited nourishment as she chewed.

It was her wolfish mastication that caught her father's ears and drew his attention to her. He slipped noiselessly behind her and tore the strip of sugar cane from her mouth, inspecting it greedily, then cast a lightning eye to where the wailing commenced again.

"Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

He cast the cane into the dust with an oath. There was no substance in it. Let the womanish curse of the gods, his daughter, have it. It could not feed his son, for if it could she would not have had it long. He spurned it with his foot and turned back to the barrow again.

Wo Loie put out a slow, cautious hand, her eyes never leaving him, and slyly retrieved it. Crouching closer to the wall, she went on with her counterfeit meal. Her frantic efforts to extract some nourishment became more noisy, lighting an angry fire in her father's dull eyes. He turned on her again and spat at her.

"Accursed weed, sucking moisture from the dry soil, while my son, my only son, the flower of my house, fades in the hot breath of the drouth! Ai!" and he glowered at her.

She shrank back against the wall, still clutching the cane, and wincing from a blow as yet unstruck.

"First affliction of the gods on my unhappy house-

hold, living to mock me, while my son, my son dies!"

But it was more the wail of sorrow now than of unreasoning anger at her, so she sat still and waited, leaving the cane well out of sight.

Wo Fat raised his hands to the brazen sky, forgetting her for the moment.

"Rain!" he cried, "rain! By the dry dust of my ancestors, for the man child to carry on my house in worship, rain, rain!"

Only the sun burned on above, a sun so hot that should a cloud appear it seemed that it must take fire from it. It seemed seeking to suck up what was left of the river, a stream too low now to touch the land. It made the very earth beneath him feel that it must soon burst into flames, for the heat crept through his shoes from it, scorching his feet as well as his soul.

"The Rain God sleeps, sleeps behind the mountains, there," and he turned to the distant, dusty purple haze that marked them over the dancing heat waves. "The mournful noise of the black-haired people fails to rouse him. The curse of the dragon is upon us, and *you*," he turned with unreasonable ferocity to Wo Loie, who cowered away, silent and trembling; "you live to mock my household, while my son, my son dies!"

But he let his futile fury burn itself out in words and turned back to his seat again. The silence stretched like a protecting mantle over her. At length it gave her courage and she cautiously raised

the sugar cane once more to her eager mouth. The gnawing within her made her forget caution, and she chewed and sucked with brutish eagerness.

Within the hut her mother's voice, still for a while, now became articulate in words. "Rice, rice," she cried. "Rice that my breasts may fill to nurse my son! Rice, rice!"

Between the gasping words Wo Fat's ears again caught the noisy mouthing of Wo Loie worrying the cane. Her very simulation of food raised his wrath against her strength. He rose and seized the stalk again, eyeing it speculatively.

"How can you suck sustenance from this?" he demanded.

"I know not, Honorable Father," she answered fearfully. "I only know that the water of my mouth eases the gnawing of my belly."

"Ai, ai," he spat at her. "You are a desert weed that thrives even in the drouth, while the flower of my house fades. The curse of the Rain God on you!"

He turned away and she began again. So, too, did her mother, a wailing, delirious plea for the impossible, "Rice, rice, for the strength to nurse my son! Rice, rice!"

Wo Fat turned savagely upon his daughter.

"Cast that stalk away," he commanded; "your mouthing irritates me!"

"Yes, Honorable Father," and she made a movement as if casting it from her, but cautiously retain-

ing it, though she dared not again put it in her mouth, even though he sank again upon his barrow and was lost in a trance of misery.

The wailing voice within settled again to a wordless chant of despair. The sun burned on. The plain crinkled and scorched and was all but audible in its crackling bath of fire. From the village, echoes of chants, of supplications, the snapping of firecrackers, the smoke of burning incense and paper prayers rose in futile offering from the natives, appealing to what appeared to be a deaf, if not dead, power.

Meanwhile, edging laboriously down the sluggish river, unaided by wind or current, a junk was slowly making its way out of the accursed land. With sweeps and poles the sweating crew propelled it, dodging sandbars that threatened to hold it back on its way to the clean, open seas across which it had come with a cargo that had been deposited in the pleasant hill lands above the famine area.

The native pilots had deserted it above, not caring to enter the desolate district even for the urge of the cash the captain offered. Two days since the last one had turned back, and from then on the captain had sculled along alone, praying the Goddess of Mercy—the patroness of sailors, and his own especial deity—to bring him and his craft safe to sea again. The treacherous shallows, hiding under the sluggish brown flood that all but stood

still upon them, had gripped him now and then, causing heartbreaking, sweating toil to cast off and nose cautiously for the hidden channel, itself too narrow and twisting to be rightly guessed even by those who knew it well in happier times. For with the Rain God's withdrawal the stream ran rampant in the sands, mocking navigation with a languid deviltry that seemed in league with the very famine itself to hold unwary water men in the land of the drouth.

The painted eyes upon the bow of the junk seemed blinded by the glare of the sun and sand. Filmed by the shimmering heat, they had now and then failed to note the dangers ahead so that the crew might sheer off from them. Time after time the junk had struck, the slow current creeping under the prow when it had grounded, digging a channel that held instead of floating it off from the obstruction.

The weary captain, minding the tiller on the high poop, could not always see ahead, even though the square mat sail had lain upon the deck for days, giving him an unobstructed view forward. The leadsman's chant was not to be trusted any more than the eyes that scanned the oily current, for under its brown mask it played devilish tricks with the sand, sifting and cutting it at unexpected times and places. Apparently open stretches of water became mocking lures, coaxing them into hidden traps beneath the brown stream. And this was falling,

falling every hour, it seemed, as they crawled along, making far less progress than they had against the current on the way up, or the unfavorable winds that the land had given them when they came in.

Suddenly they grounded once more. The captain threw the tiller hard over at the leadsman's warning cry, but too late. The prow, instead of veering off, sank deeper into the shifting sand that swirled about it under the sucking current. It piled the drift under them, lifting the bow of the junk, then letting it sink into a holding grip.

"Ai, ai!' yelled the captain, twisting the tiller still farther in a vain effort to swing clear. "Out with the sweeps. Back water! Pole, ye scum of rotten canals! Landlubbers, sampan coolies, put your backs into it! Ai, ai! Weak spawn of freshwater fish! If the God of Luck turns his face from me in this accursed drying puddle I will tan your soft hides and hang them upon the mast. Ai, ai, pull, push, spineless spawn of freshwater jellyfish! Ai, ai!" he raged in futile fury; but for all the sweating exertion of the crew, for all their grunts and guttural chatter, they grounded harder and were hopelessly stuck.

At last, after heartbreaking, exhausting efforts, the captain commanded the dripping, dropping crew to cease their struggle. He descended from the poop, and going forward, took observations over each side. They had settled hopelessly forward. The sand gave way slowly under the prow

and backing in behind it gripped the keel. They must dig out before they could hope to back off now.

He gave orders to lower the sampan over the stern and man it, then make fast to a cable and tow out from behind. The rest of the crew went over the side with such scant tools as they had aboard and attempted to dig a channel under them. But the sand was as liquid as the water and mocked them. They sank to their waists, then their armpits. One man was completely submerged and was pulled out from the quicksands just in time. The Devil of the river had all but claimed a sacrifice, and waited sullenly, crouching under the sluggish brown current, for the next attempt.

The captain hauled the frightened, chattering crew aboard once more.

"Master," they panted, "the River Devil waits below. He sucks us down and draws our feet. He is in league with the drouth, and hides under the sand with it. We cannot fight him in his own element."

Frowningly the captain realized this. He shouted for the sampan to pull and stiffen the tow, but once the line was taut both the junk and the sampan stood still, for all their efforts. The teeth of the land held the junk in a tight grip.

The captain's troubled eyes scanned the shimmering stretches of bared sand between the water and the low bank. Then his gaze traveled up and down

the twisting, mirroring surface of the unrippled river. There was not a craft afloat upon it save their own, not even a sampan.

The banks, too, seemed deserted, as dried of motion and life as of moisture. Behind the bend below them the smudge of a village appeared above the dancing heat, but it was several *li* away. It would be a long distance to go for help and would cost him much of his cargo money. But even so, something must be done, for every moment's delay sank them deeper and held them tighter in the land's clutch.

Just then Wo Fat's buffalo, disturbed by the activity so near him, rose grunting from his wallow and padded across the hot sands to the shore. The captain's eye followed him. A brute or two like that was worth a dozen pair of hands and as many broad backs, no matter how strong and willing. The River Devil could not grip them, for the animals were of two elements, land and water, and equally at home in either. They could tramp out a channel and, having tramped it, swim, at the same time towing with more strength than several sampans, no matter how well manned. There must be a farmer near, a rice grower whose paddies were dry, and with the help of his beasts there was a chance of getting the junk off quickly.

The captain threw a landing plank overboard to cheat the gripping quicksands and started across the shining stretch of hot waste in the track of the

animal. Nearing the shore, the hut of Wo Fat came to view. Uttering a prayer to his patroness that it be not deserted, he quickened his steps and, climbing the low bank, gazed about.

The powdered dust of the drouth lay thick upon all the land, crusting the rude implements of ancient agriculture. The hut itself was gray with it, adding to its normal squalor. Exhaustion had for the time stilled the cry within it, and for the moment the dwelling seemed lifeless, an empty shell, baked by the drouth and glutted by the famine. The junk captain approached it with a hope as dry as its surroundings, mentally figuring the distance to the village and the prospect of help there. Just then his eye fell upon Wo Fat sitting like a sun-baked idol on his barrow.

"Peace be unto your house," the captain greeted him in the river pidgin of his kind.

Wo Fat turned a slow head and gazed at him with dull eyes.

"There is no peace in a gnawing belly," he replied sullenly, his stare taking in the well-fed, sturdy figure of the mariner. "The dragon's breath is hot with anger at his people. The Rain God sleeps, the rice paddies are dry, our fields are parched, and my son dies at his mother's shriveled breasts."

As if to bear witness, his wife's voice within the hut recommenced its pitiful wailing, "Ai, ai, ai, ai!"

The captain's eyes softened. "I have burned

many punk to the Goddess of Mercy for this afflicted land," he said.

"May their incense be sweet in her nostrils," Wo Fat replied but not without a certain dull cynicism. "What is your style, Honorable Stranger, and from what happier province are you?" for his speech and dress were Outside Kingdom to Wo Fat.

"I am Ho Fah Lee, and my province is beyond the Great Water in the Outside Kingdom of Famosa."

"Why then enter the land of drouth?" Wo Fat inquired.

"I am a mariner, a cargo bearer, and my junk sails safely under the shadow of the sleeve of Kwan Yam. The wet winds are her breath, and the clouds bear her tears to the land."

Wo Fat grunted. "Then may her son, the Rain God, wake and pity us, for our fields and paddies are dry in the hot breath of the drouth."

"The drouth has me in its grip too," Ho Fah Lee told him. "The river shrinks far from the banks, baring the sand."

"Why then do you linger in this unhappy place?"

"The heat blinded the right eye of my junk so that it could not see the sand bar there and we ran aground. My coolies tried to dig a channel to float her off, but the River God mocks them. I have come ashore for help."

Wo Fat shook his head slowly. "There is no

help here," he said. "The people are all in the village striving to wake the Rain God."

"But you are here."

"I keep watch for the devils who strive to steal the soul of my son!"

"Rice, rice!" came the wailing voice within the hut; "rice for the strength to nurse my son, rice!"

"I will give you ten strings of cash for every pair of hands," said Ho Fah Lee.

"I cannot eat cash," Wo Fat replied dully.

"But it will buy rice," the mariner reminded him.

"No," and Wo Fat shook his head. "So Ling Gee, the *hong* keeper, will only take silver *taels* now. Already his *hong* is closed to me and my land is bonded to his credit." Then his eyes lit craftily. "But I will come, I will bring my buffalo, I will get your junk off, for I know the river. I will set you adrift by sundown for two *piculs* of rice."

Now rice was more to either of them than cash or silver *taels*. Ho Fah Lee was fearful of the little he had, so he shook his head.

"I have not enough rice to get my crew down the river," he replied. "These delays have been wasteful of my stores. All are like you, they will not take cash. Even as you, I must look to my own," and he turned away, trusting rather to the God of Luck than to part with his precious store of rice, of which he could get no more until the famine district was passed, and even then at a high price.

But Wo Fat woke now from the lethargy of

despair. The stranger had rice. If he got his junk off it would be worth the price.

"I will get you afloat," he insisted. "I will see you bound down stream for two *piculs* of rice. The delay will be more wasteful to you."

But Ho Fah Lee was obdurate. "I cannot spare it," he replied.

"But my son, my son dies," and Wo Fat appealed to his mercy.

"Even in the sight of heaven, and my own eyes, better your son than my crew. I cannot spare it," and Ho Fah Lee turned to go.

Now at this talk of rice the eager eyes of Wo Loie had lightened, first for her belly's sake, next for her heart's, for this stranger was young and well favored, and youth was in her, youth that was as hot as the land beneath her, and she was coolie enough to feel no modesty, as would her higher sisters. With the shrewdness of her sex, knowing her cheapness in the time of famine, a thought of escape came to her, for these Outside Kingdom river men she had seen before; pirates they were, often as keen upon the loot of sex as other things. Now and then one was a flower-boat dealer, and that would mean at least food, and Wo Loie, young, eager and hungry in many ways, knew no sauce of shame for rice, so that the rice be set before her.

Nor was she insensible of her physical charms, young as she was, for she was of coolie stock, unrestricted by the conventions that hedged her high-

caste sisters round about. Her life of toil in the rice paddies and beside the river had shown her the recognition of this in men's eyes, the bold men of the river who talked open pidgin.

So when Ho Fah Lee's eyes fell upon her for the first time, she used that charm with demure glances, with a twisting of her body that showed its budding lines under her threadbare jacket, a body tempting for all the pinch of the famine upon it. But in the light of her glance there was something more, the lure of a sing-song girl, a bid for favor, an invitation such as a flower-boat girl might give, yet with a certain shy, virginal coyness that was above cash.

To all of this Ho Fah Lee was far from insensible, for he was an Outside Kingdom man, one whose life was broader than the river, whose ways knew even those of the Foreign Devils, and had caught something from them. After a quick glance that told Wo Loie much of the impression she had made, he turned back to her father.

"Who is this flower that blooms in the dry dust of your field?" he asked.

"A weed of the drouth," he answered sullenly; "my despised daughter, who defies death with her unworthy presence while my son dies."

Ho Fah Lee eyed her once more with interested speculation.

"She is pleasantly favored and strong," he remarked.

"As strong and tough as the dry bamboo," dis-

gustedly admitted Wo Fat. "The gods afflicted me with her first, and mock me now with her sturdiness while my first born man-child is too weak to bear the misery that she survives."

Ho Fah Lee regarded the cheeks in which the tea-rose might have bloomed if properly nourished. Impulsively he put his hand into the pocket of his jacket and drew out a flat rice cake.

"This for your hunger, Drouth Flower," and he tossed it to her.

Her teeth flashed in a smile of thanks, but before she sank them into the cake her father had sprung upon her and snatched it from her hand.

"How dare you take food from the mouth of my son? Suck the dry cane or go empty," and he struck her with his open palm, stretching her upon the hot soil. Then he turned cringingly to the over-generous stranger.

"I take your gift, most Honorable Sir, that the cry of my child may cease while he mouths it," and with that he retired into the hut, where the weak wailing of the babe had recommenced.

Ho Fah Lee turned back to the girl again. She sat up smiling after the blow, dusting her jacket and taking a care of her pose. Nor drouth nor hunger weighed against her natural coquetry, a heritage of the freedom of her poverty and station.

"The gods have blessed you with a bright bloom in this dry land," he told her in recognition of this.

"Most honorable stranger, your eyes are as re-

freshing as the dew upon my poor face," she returned, not to be outdone in courtesy, nor yet letting him forget the flowerlike favor of her face the figure of speech called up.

"Let your mouth be refreshed as well," and he took a second cake from his jacket, mentally realizing how care and food would inspire her budding beauty to blossom to full flower. "The gods have blessed you with much strength."

"And naught else?" she asked archly.

"More forwardness than is given to the maids of my province," he informed her with an attempt at correction.

"When the drouth brings one's ancestors near enough to beckon one to them, then one may be bold," she told him gravely.

"To what purpose?" he inquired.

"That I may find favor in my lord's eyes," and she dropped her own in becoming shyness, though had he seen beneath the drooping lids, he had found them on the cake in her hand with an eagerness that took much will to restrain.

He frowned and looked her over. "What then?" he asked, more to himself than her.

She took his thought up eagerly. "My strength would serve my lord well," and she half rose to her feet in repressed excitement. "My father would part with me now for very little cash."

"Those are the shameless words of a sing-song girl," he chided her, frowning, for he feared she

might have said them to any man that paid her price and filled her mouth with food.

She saw this in his eyes. She dropped her own and with them her voice and arts.

"My Honorable Lord is kind," she told him softly. "It is written in his eyes. I would be his most abject slave and servant. For a few strings of cash, for rice to bring back my strength, I would serve my lord. Then, too, would the man-child of the house of Wo be saved as well as I," she added, for she did not wish him to think that she was lacking in that extreme virtue, filial piety, even though at the present it sat lightly upon her.

"How do you know I have not a number one wife?" he asked more softly.

"Even so, I would be number two, and serve her as well as my most August Lord. I have much strength," and she rose and stretched out her arms so as to draw the jacket over her slight but sturdy form. It was a bid for him rather than any woman she might be called upon to serve, though he knew it not.

"Of heart as well as body," he mused, intent more upon himself.

"If my lord wills," she murmured with downcast eyes that fell before his own.

He was regarding her submissive pose, when Wo Fat came out of the hut with deep apology.

"Your most honorable pardon that I seized upon your food," and he kowtowed abjectly. "But

some day, O august stranger, you yourself may have a son."

"If the gods so will," Ho Fah Lee replied. "I am a follower of the seas, a bird upon the wing. As yet I have built no nest."

At this Wo Loie's heart leaped, and then stood still in her breast. Even the cake concealed within her hand, the hunger gnawing at her vitals, was forgotten. She waited with a hope that almost stifled her. Her breath stopped low in her throat, not daring to escape until he said more.

"Build it then in a well-watered land," her father counseled, but his words were lost on her, for her ears were now attuned only to the stranger's voice.

"My island home has many streams, and the Goddess of Mercy, our deity of the sea, smiles on it. One day I must bear home a wife. Why not now? Your Drouth Flower here seems strong. Of her will spring a goodly house. I will take one mouth from you, a useless mouth to feed in these bad times. Will you give her to me for fifty string of cash?"

Now Wo Fat had no need of cash just then. With his credit exhausted at the *hong* unless his full debt was paid he could not buy rice, for So Ling Gee, the *hong* keeper, had rather foreclose the mortgage on his land. Therefore Wo Fat fell back on haggling to raise the price.

"I cannot buy rice with cash now," he said. "I cannot eat it."

"Seventy-five strings of cash," the mariner bid.

Wo Fat shook his head. "That would not pay my debt to So Ling Gee," he objected, "and he will sell me no more."

Now rice was almost as much to the junk captain as it was to the farmer. Perhaps he could not get his junk off for a day or two, but his crew must be fed, yes, fed not only now but on the whole trip down the river. The girl was another mouth. He could see what was fixed in Wo Fat's mind, and made his final bid.

"One hundred strings of cash. It is a high price, and women are cheap now, for their mouths are wide."

"A flower-boat keeper would give me that much for her," Wo Fat came back. "She is young, moon faced and well favored. Give me two *piculs* of rice."

Ho Fah Lee looked again at the girl. She was well favored, and even in the pinch of hunger there was a fascination about her that no other woman had ever held for him. She was not like the maids of his province, no, nor any others he had seen, although he had traveled much. And in her eyes was a promise, a promise that he had never before beheld, and one that he would put to the test.

Still he objected. "She is another mouth to feed," he hesitated. "I must feed her as well as my crew down the river. I will give you one *picul*."

But Wo Fat saw his advantage and pressed it. He realized that Wo Loie had fascinated the mari-

ner. When a man desires a woman he will pay for her.

"Two, and I will help you launch your junk," he went on. "I know the bar. I will bring my buffalo and put you in the channel, otherwise you may be held long in the teeth of the sand. Two, two *piculs* of rice, and I will free your junk that you make take the maid away with you at once."

"I can spare but one," Ho Fah Lee returned stubbornly.

"Two," cried Wo Fat—"two, or she dies that my son may live."

"She is another mouth," the mariner contended, but not so strongly.

Wo Loie saw this weakness and sprang eagerly to her feet, adding the weight of her argument to that of her father.

"I will eat but little," she cried. "I will live on the light of my lord's eyes. I will eat naught till he carries me to his home," and she gazed up at him with a look that promised anything, everything, so that he but took her with him.

Ho Fah Lee's eyes held hers for a moment. Her gaze was steady and definite. What she promised in it was worth all he could give for her, and more. As for his junk and the return trip, that was under the sleeve of the Goddess of Mercy and the smile of the God of Luck. He had taken many chances by land and sea; this was but another chance, with a most alluring prize.

He turned smiling to Wo Fat. "Very well, sir," he said, "two *piculs* of rice for your Drouth Flower."

Wo Fat nodded and resumed his seat on the barrow.

"Bring them, then, and take her," he grunted. "I will await you here, then see your junk out of the river."

The mariner turned and went toward the bank. Wo Loie sank down on her heels, her eyes following him till the low rise hid his form; but still her eyes rested on the spot, eyes that clouded with dreams, dreams that for the moment stilled the gnawing of her hunger but made her heart flutter in an excitement that overcame everything else.

Ho Fah Lee stumbled back across the burning sands to the junk. Out of the presence of the Drouth Flower he wondered at his folly. Women were cheap in this afflicted district now and rice was high. He could have bought two maidens for less cash than he had offered the farmer, yet because a girl's eyes were soft and her manners of a fascination he had never known, he had risked the grip of famine for his crew as well as himself to possess her. Should the River Devil hold him in his teeth, he would regret his bargain in no time at all and his heart would forget its thrill in the gnawing of his belly.

Then he smiled in remembrance of her eyes, of the pertness of her glances, of the fact that even

gripped by hunger she could not forego to show him what favor he found in her sight. Bold she was, and forward, but he was a bold man and needs must have a mate who showed that too. Then, indeed, would a house be raised in his island home where sons went forth upon the sea with no strain of weakness in them. For the sea was a gamble at best, and a sea bird's nest must be tended by a strong mate. At any rate, he was committed to his bargain, and the cast of the dice was as ever dependent on the Luck God's smile.

Now as he neared the junk there seemed an unwonted activity aboard, and the crew was chattering madly. Ho Fah Lee's thoughts came back to his immediate business. Out in the river the sampan was lying with its men at rest upon their oars and the cable trailing limply in the oily water. He quickened his pace, and as he came to the water's edge he found the junk afloat and pushed out from the bar into comparatively deep water. The Luck God had already smiled upon his venture.

"Master," the *Lowdah* explained as he climbed aboard, "shortly after you went ashore the River Devil loosened his teeth from our prow. With that we poled off and the sampan towed us safely into the channel. I am burning punk to the Goddess of Mercy," and he pointed to the altar at the mast head.

"Quite right," said Ho Fah Lee as he went below for the rice. "Light a red taper as well, for we

may have a fair cargo to take home with us," and he made ready to ship the wedding price, for once more afloat he laid his trust in the widening stream that would soon give them a fair measure of safety.

Meanwhile Wo Loie sat lost in her dreams and glorying in the budding womanhood that was about to flower in a pleasant, well-watered land, where her lord's smile would be the sun to bring it to full and fruitful bloom.

Wo Fat took no apparent note of her pending departure, even though the curse of the gods bade fair now to become a blessing. Her retirement from his house and the price she brought would be the life of his son, and in that bud of ancestral hope all Wo Fat's thoughts were centred. Rice for the mouth of the mother was milk for the mouth of the child. Any man might have had the girl for the same price, and he mentally thanked the God of Luck for sending a stranger so foolish as to pay it. Wo Fat might now wear out the drouth instead of its wearing him out, and with the Rain God's awakening the dragon's wrath would be appeased.

Just then from the path along the dry paddies came the sound of a procession making its way from the village out onto the open plain. With wailing pipes and banging gongs they came, the voices of the people joining in the mournful din. It roused both Wo Loie and her father from the separate thoughts born of one source.

"My Honorable Father," she said timidly.

"What?" he grunted.

"Where is the Province of Famosa?"

"Far to the east in the Outside Kingdom," he told her, having but a hazy idea himself, for he was of the soil, and of the soil destined to remain.

"Under the smile of the Goddess of Mercy?" she persisted.

"Heed not the Goddess of Mercy yet; she is naught to you, for you are still of my house. They are bearing the image of the Rain God to set him on the plain so that he may see how the land fares. Lift your voice and wail, for you are yet of my house and land. Lift your voice and wail so that the Rain God may wake to the noise of our sorrow," and he looked behind the hut to the procession straggling along the raised path of the dry paddies.

A sorry host it was and one to move the Rain God to compassion, had his eyes not been blinded by the sun's glare and his ears stopped with the dust of the drouth. Mingled with the squealing of the orchestra that preceded them, rising above the din of the firecrackers that were set off at intervals, rose the voices of the distressed villagers in a steady, wailing chorus, "Wake, wake, behold the parched, dry land and wake! Wake and weep, and your tears will be our joy. Wake, God of Rain, wake!"

Added to their supplications they were now using the appeal of force, for on a palanquin borne on

the shoulders of panting, sweating coolies sat the squat, ugly effigy of the Rain God. On either side of him walked men with bamboo staves beating the image at every step so that the blows might stir his sense to their prayers once the pain had roused him sufficiently to open his ears to their woe.

Failing even in this, the image was to be set upon the plain under the fiery arrows of the sun. Thus, if he were exposed to the very blight of fire that was burning up the land, there was a hope that he would awake not only to his own discomfort but to theirs, and in that waking lay their lives, the last desperate chance that faith had left to them.

Wo Fat and Wo Loie prostrated themselves in the dust and kowtowed as the procession straggled past, adding their voices to the wailing supplication of the mourners. Within the hut the man-child, waking from a trance of exhaustion, added his weak, inarticulate cry once more, and the mother's voice took up its futile chant. Surely the god was deaf indeed to the misery of his children, and they passed on under the burning sun to find a spot of earth as brazen as the sky above, a terrestrial hell where the Rain God might realize his own torment as well as his people's.

When the procession had passed, Wo Fat sat back upon his heels. Then he became aware of a figure standing in the shadow of the hut, helping the shade out with a vigorous waving of the fan in his hand.

No pinch of famine was upon his smooth, round face, and the queue that hung down below his round merchant's cap was oily and well kept, a fat, black snake writhing along the silken length of his long robe.

"Peace be upon your house," said So Ling Gee in a voice as smooth as his whole appearance.

Wo Fat scrambled to his feet, and wheeling the barrow out of the sun began dusting it with his jacket.

"My unworthy abode is honored by the kindness of your thought," he said nervously. "Exalt it by resting in its mean shade," and he tendered the poor seat with a wave of both hands. "Would that there was tea that I might fittingly refresh you," he hurried on, "but the drouth has sucked up even that pleasant moisture from my poor hospitality."

So Ling Gee seated himself on the barrow and, plying his fan, watched the procession proceed, clouded by the dust of its own raising.

"Perhaps when the Rain God sits awhile upon the plain and the arrows of the sun smite him he may awake to our misery," the merchant remarked, feeling that, considering the heat, he had done enough for his own piety in coming this far.

Wo Fat rubbed his hands and regarded the merchant's anything but wasted frame with eyes out of which he made a vain attempt to keep envy and malice.

"You, O favored of Heaven," he said, "are safe,

for your *hong* is full of rice. As for me, my son, my only son, dies for want of nourishment at his mother's breast."

So Ling Gee's eyes narrowed. "Is that a plea for me to extend my already stretched credit?" he asked severely.

Wo Fat bent lower over his clasped hands. "Those who do good deeds are remembered in the sight of Heaven," he reminded him.

The merchant frowned. "The light of Heaven has been upon my face even in your presence. Have I not set rice before the poor even as I have sacrificed to the gods?" Wo Fat acknowledged this with a deep bow. "And yet," So Ling Gee continued, "the Rain God sleeps, and I stand to lose many *taels,* even by you who knew my bounty, if he does not wake soon."

Now even with the prospect of immediate rice already in sight the desperate state of Wo Fat's suffering and debt made him bold, especially as the wailing within the hut recommenced.

"I stand to lose my son, my only son, ai, ai!" and he joined his voice to that of his wife.

"I too have a son, an only son," the merchant told him, "and my wife is now barren."

"Yes, but he is tall and straight as the second growth of bamboo," Wo Fat reminded him, then, bowing again, "may he live a thousand years."

So Ling Gee's usually placid face twitched. "He may not live a thousand hours," he said slowly, "for

he too, like your own son, withers in the drouth."

"No, no," cried Wo Fat, "that cannot be, for your *hong* overflows with rice. His mouth is full of your bounty."

"Of what avail is that?" asked the merchant bitterly. "Some malignant devil has crossed my doorsill and taken up his abode in my son's body, eating his strength. He fades before my eyes like a flower with a worm at the root. Nor prayers to the gods nor fees to the doctors avail to drive the canker out." Then his face softened. "We weep together, august friend, weep for our sons."

Wo Fat bowed his head in answering grief.

"We are brothers in sorrow," he admitted. "But I am the deepest afflicted, for the bud of promise of my house has never unfolded to bloom."

So Ling Gee nodded slowly. Then his eyes rested on Wo Loie, who had crept around into the shade and sat waiting with her back against the wall. The merchant's eyes ran over her sturdy little figure, envying in it the strength denied his son.

"Yes, but your stock is strong," he told Wo Fat. "This weed's roots go deep," and he nodded to the woman-child. "She looks as though she were born of the desert."

Her father nodded gloomily. "She will not die, but lives to curse my house with her presence. Had but my son her years and strength, I would be blessed of the gods, for surely the drouth must break soon, and she will survive it."

"The coolie stock," So Ling Gee agreed, "deep rooted in the soil, sturdy and strong."

"So would it be with my son in another set of moons," wailed the farmer.

"So will my son never be," and the merchant's brow clouded. "The hope of my house is blasted in him. My ancestral tablets will be bare, for if I took another wife, the Mean One of my inner apartment, having borne me my first son, would drive all peace from my abode," and his gaze rested moodily upon Wo Loie, who instinctively crouched nearer the wall.

Wo Fat's eyes followed his gaze as it fell upon the girl. Something in So Ling Gee's tone and the bitterness of his words awoke more hope in the farmer's heart than if the Rain God had suddenly appeared and blessed his dry fields with the tears of his mercy. He scarcely dared to voice that hope, yet he dared not let it remain inarticulate. Finally he summoned courage.

"Can it be," he asked with cautious cunning, "that my Most August Lord's eyes fall with favor upon my despicable daughter?"

"Who knows?" replied the merchant speculatively, his eyes still upon the now terrified girl.

"Such a tie would make us brothers, indeed," the farmer went on, made bold by the growing hope.

"The girl has all the strength my seed has lacked," and So Ling Gee's eyes appraised her with a merchant's greed.

"If it be my lord's will to bear her to his house," Wo Fat went on eagerly, "then will I count her a blessing in disguise and not the affliction of the gods that I had thought."

"When a strong branch is grafted to a weak limb," said So Ling Gee, speaking more to himself than to another ear, "then a new tree is born with rich fruit."

"My lord, it is even so," the farmer agreed heartily. "Her beauty as yet is in the bud. She is a green shoot, ready to sprout."

"And strong, so strong," the merchant went on gloatingly, his eyes wandering over her. "Even the famine has not withered her sturdy frame."

He crossed to Wo Loie, jerked her to her feet and looked her over with appraising eyes, as though she were a buffalo and he a purchaser of live stock. He ran his hands over her shoulders, her arms, her budding breasts, checking off her physical points with no thought for her modesty, with no care for the terrified trembling that seized her under his vandal hands. Tense and quivering, she was forced to submit to the liberties she could not resent, for she was her father's property under the appraisement of his debtor.

"I can find no outward fault with her," said So Ling Gee, turning to Wo Fat after his inspection.

"She is as sturdy as a water buffalo," he assured him, "and as tough."

So Ling Gee turned back with squinting eyes. As

a prospective purchaser he might have said too much in favor of another's goods.

"Her feet are large," he commented critically.

"One may not tramp the mire of the rice paddies and be lily-footed," Wo Fat reminded him. "Had I dreamed this honor was in store for her I had bound her feet and made a lily of her for my lord's pleasure. Even now it is not too late," he hastened on. "She is young and tender, for all her sturdiness, and her bones are soft."

"No, no," whispered Wo Loie, finding her voice at last for a terrified protest.

"Silence, ungrateful pig!" and her father turned and cuffed her so that she fell on her knees and crouched back against the wall.

He turned from her and back to the merchant. "Shall I carry her to my lord's house?" he asked eagerly, already seeing his debt canceled and his fields reseeded as her marriage price. "A number two wife needs no ceremony in the famine time."

"No, no, I do not want her for myself."

"Not for yourself?" gasped Wo Fat, his hope bursting like a water bubble in the sun.

"The sign of trouble, as you know," said So Ling Gee slowly, "is two women in one house. My day draws on to twilight. I would have peace within my home."

"Even so, peace shall dwell with you," the farmer hastened to assure him, "though you take her. She thrives on the bamboo, and I have taught her to

curb her outcry. What if the worthy mistress of your inner apartment beat her? I promise that it will not come offensively to your ears."

So Ling Gee smiled slowly and regretfully. "I am too old to raise another brood," he told him. "The man-child of my house must bear it on now. He is ripe for marriage, and if his issue is of such sturdy stock as she would give, then will the tablets of his memory have worthy descendants to worship it, and so will the sun of good fortune chase the shadows from the twilight of my life."

Wo Fat breathed again in relief. "You want her for a number one wife for your son?" he asked eagerly, for this was an honor even more engaging.

So Ling Gee nodded. "I would so honor her."

But the exaltation that this statement gave Wo Fat was almost immediately dashed by Wo Loie, who rose to her feet in open rebellion.

"No, no, my father!" she cried.

"Silence!" and he turned savagely upon her. She shrank back from the expected blow, but it was only a physical gesture, though her eyes lost none of their defiance.

She prayed silently and earnestly for the stranger's return. It was in his power alone to save her from this fate. Her flesh shrank at the profanation of submitting to the sickly son of this sleek merchant. She had seen the boy about his father's *hong,* a pale wraith that shamed his sex with no promise of sturdy manhood. The flame

that the stranger had kindled within her would scorch the dry bud of his passion did it but touch it. She was a flower meant only for a sturdy breast, and the clean strength of the Famosan mariner had taught her that with the sunlight of his eyes. To be shut in an unhealthy inner apartment would not only wither her own bloom but that of her possessor. Her protest was as much for him as for herself.

"The seed of my son needs fertile soil," she heard So Ling Gee's voice piercing the whirl of her rebellious thoughts. "The girl will do. If she wears out the drouth, her sons need fear no evil in my house."

"It is for this she has survived," Wo Fat agreed.

But not so Wo Loie. To become a mother with such a father—that was unthinkable. It was an insult to the womanhood she had but begun to realize. The very wording of the thought offended her ears.

"No, no, my father, not for this!" she cried vehemently.

"She seems lacking in filial piety," commented So Ling Gee coldly—"a coolie trait," he added almost contemptuously.

"As her father I speak for her obedience," and Wo Fat shot a venomous glance at the rebel, one that promised dire punishment when they were alone.

But Wo Loie hoped never to be alone with him again. Already she felt the sail of the junk upon

the river spread like the wings of freedom to bear her to happiness.

"I owe you no obedience," she said with quiet conviction; "I am no longer of your house."

"What does she say?" and So Ling Gee turned incredulously upon Wo Fat.

But Wo Loie answered him boldly. "I owe obedience now only to my lord."

"What does she mean, her lord?" and the merchant's tone was even more puzzled.

Before Wo Fat could recover from the confusion into which she had thrown him, she hurried on. "He sold me, sold me for two *piculs* of rice. I am no longer his to dispose of, and even now I await my lord to bear me hence."

So Ling Gee's face hardened into a mask of anger. "Wo Fat, what does this mean?" and he turned with cold fury upon the trembling farmer. "Do you make me lose my face with idle bargaining? Remember your debt and the mortgage on your land. What is this talk of sale?"

Wo Fat cringed in abject servility. "There is no sale," he whined. "No money has been passed."

"No," cried Wo Loie, "my august father would not take strings of cash for me. I was sold for rice, rice for his son, and for the man-child of the house of Wo I go down the river with my lord!"

"Down the river?" and So Ling Gee turned upon Wo Fat.

Wo Fat pointed a trembling finger to the glittering oily stretch below them. "A stranger came, a mariner from Famosa, whose junk lies there, and so, in despair for my son, I bargained for two *piculs* of rice."

So Ling Gee smiled benevolently. "Two *piculs* of rice," and he waved them away with his fan as though they had been but dry grains of chaff. "No, no, for my own son my price is higher. I am a merchant, a man of consequence, not a wandering stranger. I will cancel your debt to me. I will give you rice until the Rain God wakes. I will replenish your fields. Your seed must mix with mine and not go down the river to the Outside Kingdom with this stranger."

"No, no!" cried Wo Loie, forgetting all fear, forgetting the filial piety that is every Celestial maiden's crowning virtue, forgetting everything except that she was pledged, and to her own liking. "You shall not take away the face of my lord. He comes now with the first betrothal present. I am his number one wife, I will worship in no ancestral hall but his!"

"The gods' curses upon your clattering tongue!" snarled her father, fearing that she would hold up the business until the mariner did return, thereby forcing him to crawl like a rat up the buffalo's horn. "I am your father and you owe me obedience!"

At this So Ling Gee, realizing only too well that

authority had been transferred, took advantage of a technicality with a merchant's keen perception.

"Here is the first present," and he took a coin from his sleeve and handed it to Wo Fat. "Money has been passed between us. Our bargain is concluded."

But Wo Loie fought for her absent lord.

"No, no," she shrieked, "I will defend the face of my lord. I will not go to your sickly son, the dead branch of a rotten tree. I will only yield myself to my lord, who is young and strong and straight as the bamboo. I will not bear weak sons to a puny father. I will remain the phœnix bird my lord has made me, and it is only to his nest I fly!"

Seeing no other way to silence her wild clamoring, Wo Fat struck her full in the face with his clenched fist, stretching her stunned at So Ling Gee's feet. Then he bowed over his clasped hands to the merchant.

"My daughter willingly obeys the will of her father," he told him. "The house of Wo is honored, through her, by this alliance. May your son live, a thousand years, and may my daughter bear him a hundred sons."

So Ling Gee smiled benignantly. "If he lives to give me one grandson to glorify my house, the gods will be more than kind. I must return to the village. Already the people are coming back," and he looked at the dust cloud rising from the plain.

"Come, my daughter, there is no need of the red chair to bear you to my house."

Wo Loie crouched back against the wall, weakly whimpering, "No, no."

Her father sprang forward threateningly. "Shall I stretch you senseless so that you may be carried the easier?" he hissed.

Wo Loie rose fearfully to her knees. Then with a glad cry she sprang to her feet, for behind them appeared Ho Fah Lee bearing the promised rice upon his shoulders.

"My lord, my lord!" and her voice broke with relief as she flung herself at his feet.

Ho Fah Lee dropped the mats from his shoulder.

"I claim my bargain," he said, turning to her father.

The situation thus presented was somewhat awkward to Wo Fat. But Ho Fah Lee was a stranger to him, he would never see him again, and So Ling Gee was powerful in the district and stood well with the local mandarin, therefore there was really nothing to fear.

"Honored Sir, the price has risen during your absence," and he reached down and pulled Wo Loie to her feet, flinging her behind him. "My august friend and patron, So Ling Gee," and he indicated the smiling merchant with a bow, "bears her away to his house as the wife of his honorable son."

The mariner's face clouded ominously. "You take away my face with her," he said.

Wo Fat turned to So Ling Gee, then, taking courage from his expression, replied, "A parent's will is law, and I am So Ling Gee's debtor."

The merchant bowed, then smiling pleasantly said, with a world of insinuation in his oily tone, "Will it be necessary to consult the mandarin, worthy sir?"

Ho Fah Lee realized only too well the futility of such a course.

"I am a stranger, an Outside Kingdom man; he would decide against me," he said simply.

So Ling Gee bowed, then turned and took Wo Loie by the wrist. His grip was like iron, though his voice was soft and smooth.

"Come, Drouth Flower," he said, "you will find the garden of my house a pleasant place, and well watered." He bowed with exaggerated politeness to the mariner. "I ask your humble pardon, honored sir, but the flowers of our province are seldom transplanted. Come," and he led the weeping girl behind the hut to the raised path of the paddy that led back to the village.

Ho Fah Lee lifted the rice again to his shoulder without even a glance at the fearful Wo Fat. Then he turned back to the waste stretch of sand leading to the oily river where the now free junk lay. The Drouth Flower of his hope was blighted by the hot breath of famine on the lip of lies.

The now open eyes of his junk looked down the

winding stretch of sluggish water to where his real element lay. A breeze would spring up and catch its mat-winged sail, for it was time to depart from a land where the Goddess of Mercy had been betrayed by her son, the Rain God.

THE SMILE OF
THE GODDESS OF MERCY
觀音
彭補缺寫

THE SMILE OF THE GODDESS OF MERCY

THE green sleeve of the God of Harvest lay across the whole district of Show Hang. The air was vocal with the myriad voices of the Celestial people, making a pleasant noise under the warm smile of the sun that incubated the blessings which the Rain God had strewn upon the happy land. Under, yet above all, the noisy symphony the ceaseless song of the cicadas whirled and shrilled eternally in the trees about the town. Outside the walls the water wheels whined and groaned as they lifted the generous water of the river into the emerald promise of the paddies. Along the river itself, from the darting sampans and the majestically lumbering junks, came the boatmen's songs, high pitched and nasal. The smile of the Goddess of Mercy was upon the land, and under it the whole earth sang against the coming harvest.

Beating up the river from the distant sea a junk was tacking laboriously, helped out by sweeps against the current and the light wind that changed and shifted, as fickle but as sweet as a maiden's breath. Her captain viewed the green banks with a growing wonder at their beauty, for it was four years since he had been in the district, then dry and parched beneath the arrows of the fiery sun of

drouth. It seemed incredible to him that he was to exchange his present cargo for one of rice, for on his last trip here each grain had been as precious as a bead of white jade, and now, after the winter, there was still a surplus to be shipped down to the coast.

He scanned the banks on either side, checking off the villages as he passed them, places now happily animated in vivid contrast to the gray misery that he had known before. Somewhere beyond the curving bend above lay Show Hang, his destination. By his reckoning it could not be far, and as a passing sampan darted under the high poop on which he stood minding the tiller he leaned over and shouted to the boatman in river pidgin.

"Honorable waterman, where lies the exalted city of Show Hang?"

The sampan man swung his craft about and edged up into the quiet water under the junk's stern.

"Eight *li* beyond the Tiger's Head that juts out just above you. Swing to the other bank and use your sweeps, for the current is swift about the point, under which the River Devils lie. Go a *li* above the town and turn, then the current will bring you up against the walls."

"The Luck God's smile upon you, and here is cash for the Tiger's mouth," and the captain dropped a quarter string into the sampan as it swung off from him into the current.

He threw the tiller hard over, shouted for the

full crew to man the sweeps, swung the square sail about to catch the uncertain puffs of wind offshore, and bore over to the opposite bank. The Tiger's Head was a sign of luck to him, being, as all followers of the sea, a gambler, and he saw success upon his venture at the end of a pleasant journey.

"Ill departure, good return," he smiled, and his heart took up the crew's song as they swung against the current on their long *yulohs*.

The garden of So Ling Gee basked in the sparkling glory of the morning sun. The goldfish in the rock-bordered pool counterfeited the dancing rays that filtered through the water to them, darting in and out among the lotus stalks and roots, trailing their filmy fins and tails like animated sunbeams. Above them the lotus-blooms, beloved of Buddha, opened their cups to receive the blessings of heaven, offering up their perfume in return. Along the twisted pebble walks that ran rambling from the women's apartment to the Ancestral Hall, Li Sing, the coolie slave girl of the house of So, plied her broom, joining the shrilling cicadas in the trees above with a high nasal soprano that passed in her youthful ears as song. So intent was she upon the burden of it that she did not hear a shrewish voice shrilling from the inner apartment.

"Li Sing! Li Sing!"

The maid sang on unheeding. Suddenly the paper-paned casement of a window was flung open,

framing the face of So Fi, Mean One of the inner apartment and tyrannical ruler of the house of So.

"Li Sing!" the voice shrilled again, now too close to be ignored.

"Yes, O worshipful mistress," and Li Sing leaned forward on her broom, all trembling eagerness.

"Have the Kitchen Gods been fed?" So Fi demanded.

"Oh, yes, most worshipful mistress."

"Has the Ancestral Hall been swept?"

"Long since, O worthy mistress."

"Has the rice been measured for the midday meal?"

"Yes, most worshipful mistress."

The old lady's weazened countenance twisted into a wrinkling frown of displeasure that she could find no legitimate excuse to unloose the ready lightning of her tongue in wrath.

"Where is So Wo Loie?" she demanded, hitting upon a subject ever fruitful of trouble.

"She went to the Street of the Markets and has not yet returned," Li Sing informed her.

So Fi's small eyes snapped with wrathful sparks. "Lazy coolie loiterer," she chattered. "Send her to me the instant she is back."

"I will, Soft Moon of the inner apartment," and Li Sing bowed deferentially.

"And mind you do, foul scum of the canal," was the ungracious rejoinder, and the casement closed with a spiteful bang that seemed to jar the whole

peaceful atmosphere of what had been a quiet garden.

"Oh, yes, Bright Taper in a Flowery Lantern," Li Sing responded, even as the jar of the closing shutter mocked her words.

She raised her eyes with a start at the sound. Yes, the old termagant was really gone. Li Sing started to ply her broom once more and to take up the broken burden of her song. But it was muted now with fear and not the careless expression of subdued youth on whom the hand of authority lay heavy. The shadow of the inner apartment had fallen across the glory of the garden, dimming the sunshine and making a mock of its grace.

Behind her the lock of the gate clicked. She turned with a sudden start, then her breath eased out in a relieved sigh as So Wo Loie slipped in, set down her market basket and secured the gate behind her.

"The Mean One of the inner apartment desires your immediate presence," Li Sing informed her in a breathless rush of words.

So Wo Loie picked up the heavy basket and teetered toward the open door of the scullery.

"The Kitchen Gods demand my first attention," she flung back over her shoulder as she disappeared to set her offering before their shrine.

Li Sing tottered after her. "I had rather keep them waiting than her," she whispered fearfully. "Her face is like that of an angry dragon."

So Wo Loie laughed carelessly and came out into the garden again. "Her face is ever a black cloud," she reminded the timid maid, "and her tongue the flash of forked lightning."

The boldness of the daughter-in-law of the house had always amazed Li Sing. Now her eyes widened with terror as she saw So Wo Loie's face, for above each ear, framing her face in shameless beauty, were stuck two lotus buds that called quick attention with their own bloom to the blooming cheeks that rivaled them.

"The lightning will strike you," she chattered nervously, "if she finds you with flowers in your hair like a maiden."

So Wo Loie flung back her head until the buds trembled about her face as though shaken by a soft wind. Then she laughed as carelessly as a breeze's breath rattling the stalks of the young bamboo.

"But I *am* a maid!" she reminded Li Sing.

The little slave girl shook her head slowly. "No, you are a widow!"

The rebel tweaked her cheek playfully. "A widow may be a maid," she reminded her. "Did not my most august lord and husband depart to his ancestors even before we had lain together in the marriage bed?"

"None the less," the other returned, stubbornly clinging to custom, "you are a widow, for you were his wife——"

So Wo Loie tossed her head and her eyes shot lightning more swift and dangerous than those of the Mean One of the inner apartment. "But I was *not* his wife," and her foot struck the stone beneath it in sharp emphasis. "I was given to him in marriage, but before he could make me his wife he took the way to Heaven. Therefore, I am but the daughter-in-law of So Ling Gee, the slave of my mother-in-law; but a wife, no, no! Therefore, I am still a maid, a fledgling of the phœnix bird, for my lord never possessed me."

"Nevertheless, you are his widow."

"How stupid you are," So Wo Loie flashed back at her. "A widow I may be, but a *virgin* widow, therefore I wear the heart of a maid in my breast, and as a maid I wear flowers in my hair."

Li Sing sighed and shook her head. "Our mistress will be angry if she sees you."

"Our mistress is always angry when she sees me," So Wo Loie interupted. "She is angry that I have borne no man-child to the house of So, but, by the kindness of the Goddess of Mercy, my lord departed to his ancestors before he was my husband. For that, and that alone, I worship his memory."

"You have a rebellious heart," sighed Li Sing.

"The heart of a maid is always rebellious," So Wo Loie reminded her, "the more so if she be a widow."

It was an old argument between them, the echoing

voice of protest, the custom-old bonds of slavery bowing to authority, and, in love of the rebel, trying for her own good to turn the straying feet of her spirit into the dull path of filial duty and marital acceptance of a celibatic state imposed by fate.

But So Wo Loie was not to be bound to a dead future by a dead past. In the first place, it had no glowing memory to stifle the urge of healthy youth. The name husband whom death had snatched from the bridal bed, even as love, or at least a flower thereof, entered the house, had left naught to hold her devotion. Coolie she had been, of a larger freedom than the women of her present state, and widowhood, especially one devoid of memories, laid no cold hand upon the hot blood of youth within her. Four purposeless springs had circled since she had entered the house of So, a famine hostage to fill the mouths of her own people against the end of drouth, only to bear an eternal thirst for love and live alone in a marital desert.

She tossed her head again till the flowers shook their perfume from her ears to her nostrils. Poor, plucked flowers, never to seed, even as she. They were emblems of her own love emptiness, for she had been plucked by a dead hand for a living death, since it is forbidden by custom for a widow of the upper classes to marry, and with her departure from her father's house she had become one of a class, a useless, senseless ornament to it, without even

yielding the outward signs of resignation except by force. Better the prize of a river pirate, the loot sold to a flower boat, than thus to be cheated of the right of healthy youth.

So she brooded, the clouds of anger dimming the brightness of her eyes, while Li Sing, slave of heart as well as body, shook a doubtful head and went on with her sweeping. Suddenly her broom moved more briskly, trying to apprise the brooding So Wo Loie of the approach of danger as So Fi emerged from the inner apartment; but, lost in her own rebellious thoughts, it was her mother-in-law's voice alone that aroused her.

"So, you are back, lazy loiterer."

"Yes, most worshipful mother-in-law," she replied with an outward submission.

"Have you been out on the streets like that?" So Fi demanded angrily.

"How?" asked her daughter-in-law with apparent innocence.

"With flowers in your hair?"

"And why not?" So Wo Loie queried with even more exaggerated ignorance.

"Why not?" shrilled So Fi, stunned for the moment by such audacity, "why *not?* You bring shame on the house of So! You, the widow of my only son, to go abroad like a sing-song girl, an offense in the eyes of men——"

So Wo Loie turned and smiled at her. "Men's

eyes did not seem offended at the sight of me," she told her. "There was instead pleasure in them as I passed."

This was too much. With a swift, clawlike gesture So Fi snatched the offending blossoms from their soft resting place, hurled them to the ground and crushed them under her foot.

"Mud of the rice paddies," she stormed, "foul weed of the field, defamer of my son's memory!" and to her words she added a sound cuff on the cheek. "But for the honor of our house I would sell you to a flower-boat dealer, a trader in women."

So Wo Loie drew back and rubbed her smarting cheek. "At least I must be pleasing to the eye for that," she mocked.

"Big-footed coolie with the face of a pig," her mother-in-law spat at her, then turned and toddled into the women's quarter, leaving her offending daughter-in-law to think upon the evil of her ways.

So Wo Loie inspected the insulted feet with humorously critical eyes. "Though my feet were never bound for lilies, still, they are not so large. Ai, ai," and she laughed and stretched her arms. "I am but a phœnix bird that never had a nest, therefore my wings are free to bear my heart away."

She stooped pityingly over the trampled blossoms on the pavement. "Poor innocent blooms," and she rose, pressing their crushed petals against the soft ones of her cheek. "Go, swim with the goldfish, my pretty ones," and she dropped them into

the still pool. "May the soft waters heal your bruise." She turned and plucked a fresh one from the bordering plants. "I'll take a sister for your place," and she stuck another over her ear, using the pool for a mirror. "See, Li Sing," she cried, swinging about after she had viewed the effect, "does it not rest softly against my hair?"

Li Sing turned from her in an excess of virtue. "I will not look upon such wantonness," she cried.

So Wo Loie shrugged careless shoulders and returned to her Psyche's mirror. "I think it is very beautiful," she commented. "I do not wonder that men turned to gaze kindly at me. Their eyes are keener for beauty than those of my sour mother-in-law." She plucked another blossom and fitted it on the opposite side, trying the effect with artful coquetry. Then she turned back to Li Sing with a mischievous smile. "Had her weak son but seen me so, it might have given him the strength to live—and love," she added after the barest hesitation.

"Such thoughts are not becoming even to a widow," chided the outraged Li Sing.

"Oh, yes, they are," So Wo Loie informed her, "if she be a maid as well."

Now this fruitless discussion, one continually indulged in, but never settled between the two, might have gone on like the twitter of two rice birds in the young shoots of the paddies beyond the town walls, but from the street beyond there came the sound of the beating of gongs and drums, the squeal-

ing of pipes and the harsh cries of *yamen* runners and attendants.

"Out of the way for the Most August Shan mandarin!" yelled one in the voice of pompous authority.

"Way for the illustrious wearer of the peacock feather!" bawled another, impressing the curious crowd with the glory of the master borne along behind them on the shoulders of his chair coolies.

So Wo Loie cocked a curious ear toward the sounds, forgetting herself and her recent difficulties in the healthy curiosity of youth.

"Ai, ai," she giggled back at the petrified Li Sing, "it must be the new Shan mandarin from Honan," and she edged toward the gate, striving to open it a crack and peek through. "I wonder what he may be like?"

"If the Mean One should see you," warned the maid.

"But I must know what the new mandarin is like," persisted So Wo Loie. "I wonder if his August Worship be young and moon-faced," and her hand was upon the gate again.

The tumult stopped without. The wheezy breathing of the coolies turned to grunts as the chair was set down. The banging gongs and squealing pipes were stilled in an instant and hands were fumbling at the outer latches of the gate.

"Come back, come back," chattered Li Sing; "come back, foolish one, they are stopping here," and she sank down on her heels kowtowing toward the gate.

So Wo Loie followed her, but was less eager to obey. Nor was her ceremonial obeisance so profound. As a matter of fact, no sooner was the gate thrown open than she raised her head high enough from the ground for her eyes to take in the August Presence about to enter.

The head lictor advanced into the garden before his master. Then the chair disgorged a Glorious Presence, clad in the official robes of a mandarin of the third class, and from his cap dangled the one-eyed peacock's feather, showing him to be exalted even above his station. Though beauty was not one of his natural decorations, an excess of official dignity made up for a defect of which he was apparently unconscious. Framed in the gate, he waited for the yellow umbrella to be placed above his head before he stepped into the garden and allowed the gate to be closed behind him.

So Wo Loie's eager eyes regretted the absence of youth the August Presence displayed. The veneration of antiquity sat but lightly upon her. Had the mandarin been younger and of a more pleasing presence, she had been more affected; nevertheless, as a person of importance he was to be considered. The heavy mask of his face, made a bit sinister by thin, drooping mustaches, was masculinely impressive. The movement of his fan was slow and ceremonious, giving an impression of dignity, studied but effective. The coldness of his eyes, set and stony between the narrow slit of his lids, was less over-

whelming than he might have expected had they rested just then upon the kneeling figures of the girls, for So Wo Loie had studied the eyes of men enough to know that, though the rest of the features may preserve a mask of calm, therein lay the betrayment of the heart did but a woman play for it.

But the mandarin stood in stony imperturbability until his presence had been announced, leaving his head lictor to advance to the door of the Ancestral Hall and make it fittingly. That worthy rapped with his staff upon the door, announcing to the master of the house the honor about to be conferred on him.

"So Ling Gee," he cried in a loud voice, "your poor abode is honored by the Illustrious Presence of the Most August and Exalted Shan mandarin, Yet Hing Show, of the third rank, wearer of the one-eyed peacock feather by the imperial favor of the Glorious Son of Heaven."

The lictor stepped back to the side of his master. The mandarin stiffened the dignity of his pose into statuesque grandeur. He might have been an image of Kwan Tow, so still he stood, so massively impressive. Well might So Ling Gee, appearing at the summons in the doorway of his Ancestral Hall, fall upon his knees and abase himself with the kowtow, not only in accordance with ceremonial custom, but for the effect produced upon him by the August Presence.

Three times the merchant's forehead touched the

ground, then, still on his knees and with lowered face, his courteous voice acknowledged the distinction of the honor he was receiving.

"My mean and shadowy abode is lighted by your illuminating presence as by the glory of the midday sun appearing suddenly at midnight," he cried. "May you live a hundred times a thousand years, and be blessed by the gods with a hundred sons," and again he hid his face as though overcome, as indeed he was, by the nearness of the Exalted Presence.

"His Imperial Majesty the Son of Heaven has given into my unworthy hands the administration of this district," replied Yet Hing Chow in explanation of his visit, "and as one of its foremost citizens I greet you in His Illustrious Name."

So Ling Gee abased himself once more. "This day shall be treasured in my memory until I am gathered to my thrice honored fathers."

"May you ever prove worthy of the favor I confer upon you by my attendance," the mandarin admonished him.

"The perfume of your presence shall pervade my humble house, scenting it like a jar of roses," So Ling Gee assured him.

"For the fairness of your words," replied the mandarin, well pleased, "you may rise in my presence."

Then as the merchant obeyed, but with a slow and becoming dignity, the eyes of Yet Hing Chow began

to rove about the pleasant confines of the garden. For the first time he became aware of others in the persons of the kneeling girls, for So Wo Loie was now sitting back upon her heels, her eyes frankly taking in the Glorious Presence who shed the light of his favor upon the garden. And in her eyes was a reflection of that light, though as his gaze fell upon her she modestly, and effectively, veiled them with drooping lashes, knowing well how an appearance of coyness aided a beauty of which she was only too sure. Yet Hing Chow frowned and cast his gaze beyond her, conscious, however, that her own was following him.

"The smile of the Luck God upon your garden," he said to his now risen host.

So Ling Gee bowed over his clasped hands. "Since the year of the great drouth the Rain God has been most kind to our district, and now the Son of Heaven blesses us with your administration."

Yet Hing Chow relaxed the sternness of his lips in pleasure at the compliment. Then he let his eyes come back to the magnet of So Wo Loie's, nor did she drop them this time in mock confusion, but frankly held his own for a moment.

"Not only is the Rain God kind to your house," and the mandarin turned back to So Ling Gee, "I see your garden bears a love flower most pleasing to the eye."

So Ling Gee shot a swift, malignant glance at So Wo Loie, but his voice was soft and purling

as he addressed his guest. "My most despicable daughter-in-law," he told him in abject apology, "the virgin widow of my only son who has departed to his ancestors."

Yet Hing Chow favored the unabashed So Wo Loie with a glance of distinct and growing interest. "A virgin widow?" he questioned, for to say the least it was a most unusual state, and the maid, or at least she who had the appearance if not the coyness of a maid, was worthy of attention as a love blossom.

"Ah, my poor son——" sighed So Ling Gee.

"Yes, yes," the mandarin agreed, "I sorrow at your loss—and his," he added, almost to himself.

So Ling Gee felt that he must turn the subject more directly to the matter of his house, for So Wo Loie, filling the eye of the mandarin as she appeared to, must not, being in his house, yet in a measure not quite of it, absorb too much of the august attention.

"The gods have afflicted me sorely," he complained. "In the year of the great drouth a devil entered my dwelling and stole the Soul of my only son. His widow there was purchased that his seed might be left to console me, but even as she was borne into my house he had departed from it."

Yet Hing Chow gave grave ear to the words, but a more attentive eye to the object thereof. "It is a shame that the bud, for so she must have been then, was not worn upon his breast," and there was a sincere regret in the Great Voice.

"The will of the gods is beyond question," replied

the merchant resignedly. "If she had but gladdened my house with descendants her presence now would be more pleasing to my eyes."

"Even so," his guest made answer, "she is pleasant to mine."

So Ling Gee saw that the subject must be changed. There was that in the eye of the mandarin—an eye that seemed centred upon that shameless baggage that degraded her widowhood with an open ear to the import of words but thinly disguised—that made the merchant's hand itch for a bamboo with which to correct her. Ceremony forbade him to command her to arise in the Presence and depart, therefore, he must remove the Presence from the dangerous proximity of her.

"Her honor is mine that she offend not your most august sight," and So Ling Gee began cautiously manœuvring to change the subject without apparent abruptness. "Here," and he pointed to a table that adorned the wall of the Ancestral Hall, "here is a memorial to her lord, my one man-child, the beautiful So High Wing. Will you not honor it with your worship?" and the merchant presented him with a punk from the many before it, and indicated the lighted taper burning in a glass shield before the tablet.

Yet Hing Chow took the proffered offering from his host's hand, lit it and stuck the smoking punk into the bowl below the tablet, then he stepped back and bowed reverently.

"The second spirit of my son is honored," So Ling Gee told him, "and with it his unworthy widow."

"I have honored all here with my presence," the mandarin replied, not wishing the fact to be overlooked, particularly by the widow, at whom he cast a glance, to find her own gaze still upon his every action.

Nor was this fact lost upon th merchant, who found the official's attention too closely fixed upon inconsequential things.

"Will you not further honor me by stepping into the Ancestral Hall?" and he bowed low and indicated the door with a sweeping gesture of hospitality. "My house and all that it contains is yours. The north seat awaits you."

Yet Hing Chow inclined his head in condescension. "I will take the north seat," he replied, then entered with dignity, followed by his host, leaving the garden to the sunlight of his remembered presence and the loosening of the restraint that he had imposed upon it.

So Wo Loie watched the departing forms with a smile playing upon her lips, a smile of triumph it seemed to the fearful Li Sing, who had felt rather than seen the by-play, having kept her face close to the ground during the whole of the interview, for she was ever obedient to custom. She glanced fearfully toward the women's apartment before she

dared look back to So Wo Loie and fully analyze the smile. Then she did not dare to put into words her displeasure or her fear of it. Rather it was So Wo Loie who spoke boldly of the very thing that Li Sing forbade to voice.

"He was not so young, and yet he saw the flowers in my hair," and her mistress patted them gently as she rose from her heels.

"You lose your face with wantonness," cried the outraged maid.

So Wo Loie shook her head vigorously. "No, no, for his most August Presence found it most pleasing." She let the smile knit into a little puzzled frown, and her eyes fixed themselves intently upon the closed door of the Ancestral Hall. "I wonder if he has a number two wife," she speculated aloud.

"She would be in his last district," Li Sing reminded her.

So Wo Loie nodded slowly. "Yes, that is so," she agreed, "but even so, he can take another here."

"What is that to you?" asked Li Sing, aghast at the trend she feared her thoughts were taking.

"He found me pleasing," and So Wo Loie gave a coquettish toss of her garlanded head.

Li Sing gasped at the audacity of her. Her mouth fell open, but for a moment speech was denied her in the shock of her thoughts. At last she commanded her held breath. "How dare you," she

cried in horror—"how dare you speak so before your husband's tablet?"

So Wo Loie cast contemptuous eyes toward it, ignoring with her very glance the smoke of incense but newly lighted in a false worship, as she well knew. Before Li Sing she did not need to pretend. For all the terror that her conduct and utterances gave her, So Wo Loie was sure of her devotion, a devotion half born of the rebellion the slave girl was incapable of doing anything but admire in her secret heart.

"I was never his," So Wo Loie told her, turning from the shrine. "I am but the despised and childless daughter-in-law of the house of So, the drudge of a disappointed mother-in-law. Better a love flower in a mandarin's *yamen,* a lily for his breast in a bowl of jade."

"But a widow may not remarry," Li Sing protested, "she is of the phœnix brood."

So Wo Loie smiled at her pityingly. "The egg was never hatched," she told her.

Before Li Sing had time to reply, So Fi bustled out of the inner apartment, cutting short talk and laying the hand of fright upon the ready tongues of them.

"Why are you two chattering idly here?" she demanded. "Is there no work to do?"

"I go, O Gracious One," cried her daughter-in-law, toddling off into the kitchen, a sure haven in times of stress.

So Fi scowled after her and then turned back upon the flustered maid, who was looking about wildly for the discarded broom that might serve as a wand to ward off punishment.

"What was the music that I heard?" her mistress demanded sharply.

"Music, music?" stammered the maid.

"Ai, ai, music, and not the chatter of your idle voices. Music, I said. I heard it, where was it?"

"It was without, it is without, it accompanied the new Shan mandarin, who is now within the Ancestral Hall paying an official visit to our exalted master, your worthy husband."

"Why was I not informed?" demanded So Fi, bustling futilely about. "The water must be heated for the tea. The cakes must be seen to, the rice wine heated. There must be no lack of hospitality or we shall lose our face. So Wo Loie!" and she raised her voice in querulous command.

Her daughter-in-law cautiously stuck her flower-crowned head out of the kitchen door. "Yes, Bright Shining Light?" she queried with a soft assumption of interest.

So Fi's impatient hand motioned her out into the garden. "Why was I not called to oversee the Kitchen Gods?" she demanded.

"We are but now risen from our knees," her daughter-in-law informed her. "I was attending the Kitchen Gods myself. See?" and she indicated the pot that she held in her ready hand.

But So Fi's angry eyes were not upon it but on the flower-framed glory of her face. "And is it thus the mandarin has seen you?" she cried with suppressed fury.

"How, O Gentle Guardian of my Life?" asked So Wo Loie, innocent for once, and for the moment forgetful of the fresh offense of decoration that she had committed.

"Mock me not," cried So Fi, wresting the pot from her hands. "What would his August Presence think to see you so?"

"He seemed well pleased," So Wo Loie answered, only too truthfully.

"Well pleased, indeed, you coolie baggage!" and So Fi loosened all her wrath in spiteful words. "I'll set your big feet in the paths of filial duty. I'll show you that the honor of the house of So is not to be defamed by your wantonness. That for your flower-dressed head, and that, and that!" And raising the pot she aimed blow after blow at the offending beauty.

The first one So Wo Loie caught upon her shielding arm. It brought her to her knees. She threw both hands before her face, instinctively, for though bruises enough were her lot, she did not care to carry them too much in evidence. As she ducked and dodged, she made a poor target, for practice had given her agility; and as the good dame swung too wide, the pot flew from her hands and bounced away upon the stones of the walk.

Fortunately, her physical fury spent, So Fi did not attempt to retrieve it, but turned upon Li Sing, who stood with idle broom, uncertain if she would be the next recipient of wrath or not.

"You?" and the mistress flashed at her, "why do you stand gaping there? Ply your broom before I take it from you and instruct you with its weight!"

"Yes, gentle mistress," and Li Sing began a quick, wild sweeping of the already clean walks.

So Wo Loie was again upon her feet, but uncertain of their next step. So Fi saved them both with her own decision. "Now see you to your master's entertainment." And she flounced back into her own apartment, like a wind whisking away and leaving a wake of destruction behind it.

So Wo Loie looked after her with a sigh of relief. "We are well and gently instructed," she said to Li Sing in mock gratitude. Then she raised the sleeve of her jacket and critically examined the mark of the pot upon it. The soft, firm flesh showed an ugly purple bruise like a marred fruit. "It is well my sleeve conceals it," she said philosophically, dropping the shield over it once more. "Had she struck my face, his Most August Presence might not have found it so fair to let his eyes rest pleasantly upon when he came out again."

"You count too much on such attention," warned Li Sing.

"And why not?" So Wo Loie flashed back at her

angrily. "Am I to waste the bloom of my youth here? I was sold to So Ling Gee because my coolie strength mixed with the weak blood of his house might blossom in new stock. Now she who bore the barren bud tests that strength with the iron of hate. The mandarin may take me for what he will, so that I may escape this. You are a slave, Li Sing, but one day marriage will set you free. My marriage made of me a slave, and I will break the bond that death put on me by any means."

Li Sing regarded her with a sort of fearful pity. "But women are born to obey the laws," she said, seeking some balm to give her.

"Women are born to obey the laws of love," cried So Wo Loie, "and I am a woman, loveless as yet for all my marriage. But we will see, we will see——"

"Mistress, there is no way for you. Even as now you bring fresh trouble on yourself. You must not think of love. That is in the hands of our parents, our guardians, the gods."

So Wo Loie made a gesture of disdain. "Li Sing, you talk like the slave you are. Well, be a slave, and obey even me, so hasten with the tea. You are so spiritless that even I can command you," and she waved her to the kitchen.

Li Sing shook her head and tottered away. So Wo Loie paced the garden, biting her lips and thinking hard. Of what use were her struggles after all? Had she but remained in her father's

hut outside the town, she might have tramped out the fever of her blood in the mire of the rice paddies, or, by now the mother of a coolie brood, been glad enough for a respite from the thing called love. Had the sickly son of the house of So but lived long enough to give her and it a child, her destiny by now had been fulfilled, or at least the hunger of her breast had been appeased, and this slow canker that was eating her had found an antidote in motherhood.

Yet somehow she realized that that alone would not have sufficed for her wild spirit. To bear the pains of motherhood but for the sake of offspring would not have been enough, yet even that was now denied her. Had she gone down the river with that junk captain, ah, then her destiny had been fulfilled, or at least the wild urge of adventure would have found an outlet. But he had gone, and she remained nursing a memory that was like a live coal in her breast heating all her blood to the boiling point of fury. Memory was not enough; it could not stay the gnawing of her heart any more than the thought of rice could do aught in the time of famine but wake the pangs of hunger to a stronger urge.

And to put rice into the mouths of others she had put eternal hunger in her heart, and that she would not bear. If she might not eat the rice of love, she would have its substance without its savor. The mandarin had told her that with his eyes. Other

men had told her that. She had a gift of beauty that men desired; and was not her desire as much to be appeased as theirs? What was empty custom, family honor and all the cant with which she was surrounded? The stuff of woman martyrs was not in her, and no desire of the spirit that was not born first of the flesh, for in the flesh she lived—strong, healthy, hearty flesh whose very strength called out for first service.

Her musings drew her to the tablet of her husband's memory. What a memory it was! The hand of his father had snatched from her the chance of happiness to bear her to a memory as false as the one who had inspired it, a sickly lad too weak to clasp a bride, and yet, thanks to custom, strong enough to hold her to the mockery of widowhood at which her every sense revolted.

Her lips curled at the smoking punk burning before the shrine. The very hand that placed it there had mocked the fire he lit with the wanton one that smouldered in his eyes as they fell on her. The name she bore was but a name and no real bond to hold her heart, nor yet her body. The smouldering punk was hotter than the spark of life she never touched. The curling smoke, pungent and sharp in her nostrils, was a glowing lie, one that she could not bear to see sending the false scent of a dead life into the live air that she must breathe. It was a desecration more to her than to him they lit it for, and in a sudden frenzy she plucked it

from its place and, casting it on the ground, set her foot upon it, stifling the weak flame of its sacrifice, even as a dead custom sought to stifle the flame in her heart. Well, she was stronger than custom, stronger than the dead, for she was live and quick, and sweetly desirable.

A cry behind her made her turn quickly to confront Li Sing emerging from the kitchen, her eyes wide at the desecration of the stifled punk. Horrified, she cried, "Wo Loie, what are you doing?"

So Wo Loie drew herself up to her full but slender height. A certain dignity seemed to have settled upon her. "I have no memories of him," she said, "therefore, I cannot see his tablet offend with false worship."

Li Sing cowered away from such sacrilege. "The gods will be angry," she warned her.

So Wo Loie smiled, serenely unafraid. "But the Goddess of Mercy," she replied, "is a woman, and she will understand."

Li Sing shook her head doubtfully. "Why do you think so much of her?" she asked.

So Wo Loie's eyes softened. Over them crept a gentle mist like clouds ready to let fall a pitying rain. "She is the patroness of the sea," she said slowly, her eyes looking through the cloud mist to the great water she had never seen, yet where she knew the kindly clouds are born. "Once, before I came here, I met one who traveled under the shadow of her sleeve, an Outside Kingdom man he was, a

mariner from the far Province of Famosa. It was in the time of famine, and my father sold me to him for two *piculs* of rice. But So Ling Gee had my father in his debt, and he wanted me for his sickly son. As they bore me away from my rightful lord, I prayed to the Goddess of Mercy, and she must have heard, for my husband passed to his ancestors even as I entered the house, and so he never possessed me, nor any other man as yet. I pray to her still, but the fair stranger has never returned. But love is not dead in me, and so I must find something to take his place, for memory is light food to a hungry heart."

"I am ashamed to listen to you," protested Li Sing.

Then your own heart has never spoken to another," So Wo Loie told her with scornful pity.

Just then the men emerged from the Ancestral Hall. Fearful of being taken to task for the neglected tea, So Wo Loie motioned the startled maid back into the shelter of the kitchen wall, while she herself dropped respectfully to her knees; then, having performed the kowtow, she rose to her feet, and, apparently not seeing the scowling glances that her father-in-law cast at her, loitered about the garden, keeping well toward the shelter of the kitchen wall, so as to retreat within the shrine of her gods if the need became urgent.

The mandarin again paid the garden the compliment of his condescending attention, much of which

was superciliously directed toward its animated blossom, who drew his eyes as though they had been bees.

"Your house is a place of pleasant flavor," he told his host, "and your garden is an open cup of fragrance."

So Ling Gee bowed his acknowledgment. "Its lotus blooms are gladdened by your presence as by the bright sun."

On the offside of his host Yet Hing Chow managed to smile at So Wo Loie, an act of open condescension that included her in his next remark. "So I observe," then turning back to So Ling Gee he continued earnestly, "I find this district of Show Hang much to my liking. It will be a pleasant place in which to sojourn.

The merchant smiled delightedly. "It shall be my honor, August Sir, to administer to your comfort in any way that is possible by my poor efforts."

The mandarin considered this gravely for a moment. "That is well to know. My *yamen* is as yet unsettled."

"The goods of my *hong* are at your most august disposal," So Ling Gee hastened to assure him.

"I was thinking more of the flowers of your garden."

"I shall be delighted to transplant them for your pleasure."

Yet Hing Chow looked him over with a crafty eye, wondering if or not he had taken him literally

or caught the subtle meaning he sought to convey without actual utterance. "I hope your words are more than idle courtesy," he said gravely.

"My mouth is the well of truth to your worship," and so too seemed to be the eyes with which the merchant looked back into his.

The mandarin regarded them and his words through a thoughful pause. "Perhaps I shall test the purity of its waters. If I may choose of your garden flowers, I will pay many *taels* for the one I fancy. The fairest bloom does not border the goldfish pond. The courtyard of the *yamen* is well kept, but its inner apartment is blossomless. You know, most august friend, that one in an official position may not bring an old wife into a new district."

Now at these words So Wo Loie knew that not for nothing had she used her eyes, and for still more would she use her ears, and after that all other arts and wiles at her command. Here was escape, escape from the drudgery of the household, escape from the desolation of her falsely widowed state. What though it was the hand of lust and not love that turned the key of her prison. The door would open and she would go out, out into the sunshine of smiles that she would conjure up—if not the smiles of one whom she desired, at least enough to light the utter darkness of her heart, even with a false beam.

But So Ling Gee was older and more dense, or

at least affected to misunderstand the purpose of the conversation. Ignoring the obvious, he fell back on the conventions, thinking his friendly office had been sought outside his own house. "I will find an excellent go-between to attend you," he told him.

Yet Hing Chow oiled his next words with a smile. "What need of a go-between, between friends?" he asked insinuatingly.

Still So Ling Gee affected to misunderstand. "Now for the first time," he replied slowly, "I regret that the gods have not afflicted me with a daughter."

The mandarin edged nearer to his point. "Do you consider your daughter-in-law an affliction?"

"She has not borne the house a son."

Yet Hing Chow smiled broadly. "The fact that she is a virgin makes her attractive to my eyes," he replied.

Apparently at last the light broke on the merchant. "O Most August Sir," he cried, "greatly I appreciate the honor that you pay my house. Nevertheless, a widow may not remarry."

"I have a number one wife in Honan, a number two and three at my last posts," he informed him. "There are five sons to do my memory honor, but I have brought no concubine with me to solace my hours of leisure."

At this So Wo Loie desired to hear no more. If she were carried to the *yamen,* her place was

fixed. Honor was not to be hers, rather dishonor, but freedom at least, and escape from the drudgery and abuse of her present position. She slipped quietly into the shrine of the Kitchen Gods. At least as a love blossom she need not serve them, only the pleasure of her master and a simulation of her own. A widow must take what the gods offered. Except for her virginity they had offered nothing.

But So Ling Gee took another view. In name at least she was of his house, and first of all his house must be considered. Therefore he frowned through a pause, then spoke slowly. "I have a slave girl, a likely child and comely——"

"Slaves are cheap," Yet Hing Chow cut him short contemptuously. And besides, he had observed Li Sing and found her poor and spiritless, a drab contrast to the vivid widow, who would play another game with a man's senses besides the one of dumb submission. "One may fancy the perfume of a certain flower."

Still the merchant hesitated and fumbled with excuses. "If So Wo Loie were indeed my daughter I should receive the red boxes of betrothal presents gladly, but she is of my house only as a phœnix bird. In her, though not by issue, the memory of my son lives."

"That he never possessed her," contended the mandarin, "wastes her bloom in idleness."

But So Ling Gee was not convinced. "It is a

delicate question, O Most August Presence," he contended. "A daughter is one's own to do with as one wills. But a daughter-in-law, even though she be that but in name, makes her one of the house, if not of the flesh, of So."

"I am prepared to pay a high price for her," Yet Hing Chow told him. "If she were indeed your own and not the widow of your son, I would make her my number four wife. You see my position, also my desire. Is not five hundred *taels* better than her presence to you? You might buy two slave girls for that. And I should think that her presence, now that your son is gone and she unfruitful by him, would offend your sight."

So Ling Gee nodded his head slowly, as though thinking deeply. "It is a matter that I must give much consideration. There is a chance that in disposing of her thus I might lose face. Five hundred *taels* is a small price for that. I have the honor of my house to see to as well as the memory of my son."

"I appreciate your position," the mandarin conceded, "as a father more than a father-in-law. I will consider your position the while you consider mine."

" 'He who considers long, acts wisely,' " So Ling Gee quoted.

"He who considers the wishes of those in high places sometimes raises himself," the mandarin reminded him.

At that Yet Hing Chow clapped his hands loudly for his attendants and as a signal that the visit was over. The gate behind them swung open and the head lictor admitted the umbrella bearer to attend his master. The chair coolies arose from sitting on their heels and lifted the sedan with grunts and groans. Outside in the street the curious crowd began craning their necks to get a look at the Great Presence, while the *yamen* runners made ready their whips to clear a path through the streets for the homeward trip.

Yet Hing Chow turned to his host, unfurling his fan once more. "May peace be upon your household," he commanded, "and may wisdom, like a lantern in a dark place, burn there."

So Ling Gee bowed low three times over his clasped hands. "May the light of your presence often be upon my mean abode," he craved.

"The smile of my favor is ever upon those who prove their friendship for me," and Yet Hing Chow passed through the portal and entered his chair.

The gate slammed behind him, leaving So Ling Gee frowning at the closed barrier. With that the gongs began to clash and the reed pipes took up their ear-splitting shrieks. The runners began shouting for clearance way, swinging their whips and making a great noise to the glory of their master. The sound died off in the distance, but still the master of the house continued to stare at the

gate that barred a problem, but not for long, as he well knew.

So Fi, waiting for silence to settle once more upon the garden, now cautiously stuck her head out of the women's apartment. "Did I not hear the joyful noise of a Distinguished Presence in our poor house?" she asked her frowning lord.

"Yes, a presence as noisy as your own," he informed her.

But So Fi was not to be put off with a surly answer. "The new Shan mandarin has favored you?" she persisted.

"He favors more one who is not of our house though in it. He has cast amorous eyes upon our despised daughter-in-law. For that his purse must be moved as well as his heart," and So Ling Gee turned the matter of *taels* as applied to sentiment over in his merchant's mind.

So Fi nodded vigorously. "It is well that you dispose of her before she brings shame upon us and the memory of our departed son," she advised.

"Peace, woman, peace!" cried her husband. "I am merchant enough to know the value of a desired article." Then he turned sternly upon her. "Now see that you do not beat So Wo Loie again until this business is concluded. A bruised fruit is not pleasing to the eye of the purchaser."

"Yes, my most worthy lord, but she is a shameless baggage!"

So Ling Gee frowned. "If I am not mistaken, it is her very shamelessness that has attracted him."

"The low coolie, the noisome weed," the old dame began, when her lord cut her short with an impatient gesture.

"It was her coolie strength that helped her bloom under your tender care," he reminded her.

"I taught her the ways of widowhood," she hastened to assure him.

So Ling Gee considered this for a moment. "From our house she will not go as a widow," he said slowly, "but as a concubine. Mind that you instruct her as fully, but not so forcibly, in her new vocation. I warn you to be gentle, or I myself may correct you with the bamboo."

Before the shrewish tongue of So Fi found a defiant answer to this little to be considered threat of her lord, whose tongue, in the inner apartment, was longer than his arm, So Wo Loie slipped out of the kitchen to ascertain whether or no her attendance upon the gods there was to meet the approving eye of their quondam guest. Seeing only the members of her household, and particularly the critical eye of So Fi, she raised a sudden and despoiling hand to the thorn-bearing blossoms above her ears.

"No, no, my daughter," cried her mother-in-law in unbelievably honeyed tones, "leave the flowers there."

With the unconsciousness of shock So Wo Loie

dropped her hand and stepped uncertainly into the garden. "Leave the flowers there?" she echoed in incredulous repetition.

"Yes, yes, they draw attention to your flower-like face," the Mean One told her, but in a voice that belied her secret name.

One blossom had been loosened from its resting place and now lay uncertainly in So Wo Loie's hand. Her eyes dropped to it, then lifted and shifted from one inscrutable face to the other.

"Your worthy mother-in-law has spoken," said So Ling Gee in quiet kindliness; "it is for you to obey," but his words were more of a request than a command.

So Wo Loie slowly stuck the flower over her ear. "Yes, lord of my actions and hers," she breathed uncomprehendingly.

"Some women are made for beauty," So Ling Gee went on unctuously, "others for the more useful walks of life. It is for those above them to decide."

"The gods, my lord?" So Wo Loie inquired innocently.

"The gods have nothing to do with women," he told her with something of a return to his normally harsh manner. "Men are the masters of their lives."

"And *I* am the guardian of your footsteps," So Fi reminded her.

"My ears are open to the wisdom of my elders,"

and So Wo Loie bowed her puzzled head submissively.

"Then lend them to the gentle counsel of your mother-in-law," and So Ling Gee retired into the Ancestral Hall, leaving So Wo Loie to cast a doubtful glance after him before returning her gaze to the waiting So Fi.

Her mother-in-law's harsh visage was struggling grotesquely with what she considered a smile. "The master has a gentle heart for you," she told the rebel in a manner that attempted to convey that her own was but a reflection of her lord's.

"May I humbly inquire, O worthy mother-in-law," her daughter proceeded cautiously, "why it now wakes in my interest?"

"Because the bud of your beauty is opening to fullest bloom."

"Only in his eyes?" persisted So Wo Loie.

"In whose else?" and there was an elaborate nonchalance in the cross-question.

So Wo Loie, now somewhat recovered from her first surprise, boldly dropped her submissive manner. "The Most August Shan mandarin, Yet Hing Chow, has but departed from our poor house." She met her mother-in-law's eyes squarely. "He much admired the humble flowers of the garden."

So Fi folded her hands and softened her gaze. "The mandarin's eyes are keen for beauty," she agreed.

So Wo Loie suppressed a smile and dropped her

eyes in mock modesty. "They rested, as the sun, upon my face," she said softly.

"It is unmaidenly to say so," her mother-in-law chided, but in gentle reproof.

"May not a widow speak so to the wife who bore her husband?" she asked as if requesting counsel from her own mother.

"Perhaps, my daughter," So Fi agreed.

"Tell me," So Wo Loie went on more boldly, "has the Shan mandarin a wife with him?"

So Fi shook her head. "A mandarin does not bring a wife into a new district. The inner apartment of his *yamen* is perfumed by a native flower."

So Wo Loie smiled. "Then if I am pleasing to his sight, may it be that I may be carried from this house to his *yamen* as a number two wife?"

Again So Fi shook her head and sighed quietly. "A widow is not permitted to remarry," she reminded her.

"But does not the mandarin make the laws?" she inquired innocently.

"He administers the laws of the Son of Heaven, my daughter, but the laws of custom are made by the gods, and even those in high places must obey them."

So Wo Loie was enjoying the discomfort that their exchange of pleasantries was causing her erstwhile tyrant. She was being led by the pleasant path of argument to a goal that was hers to accept or reject, according the laws of custom, and she was

making the most of her loitering along the way. Besides, she desired to create the impression that her feet were being guided, not rushed, to the place in the *yamen* she had already decided upon, therefore she would make her mother-in-law her instructress and her guide.

"Then what is it that the worthy lord of our house and you, most worshipful mother-in-law, are seeking to make me understand?" she asked.

So Fi was obviously ill at ease. If she were not forcing her daughter-in-law to wifehood, a thing not possible under the laws of custom, she must find a gentle name for the thing she was proposing, a careful phrasing that would save both their faces and yet accomplish the desired purpose.

"You may perfume the mandarin's inner apartment as a love blossom," she told her in a voice that sanctioned it apparently for the glory of the house of So and her own betterment.

"A concubine?" asked So Wo Loie with almost brutal directness.

The old lady wiggled uncomfortably at the brazenness of the word. Had it not been necessary that So Wo Loie's full consent must be obtained she would have forced her to do it with the rough authority she had always exerted over her widowhood. But now she curbed her tongue, of a necessity, for it takes sugar to catch flies. "Even that is much honor for a widow."

Her daughter-in-law smiled with the first open

triumph she had ever attained in the household. Though she knew the game was in her own keeping, she passed the responsibility over to the authority that had always abused itself and her.

"I bow to those who have my life in their hands," she told her guardian softly.

So Fi smiled, this time with obvious relief. "I have cultivated you from a weed in the drouth to be a garden flower a mandarin has cast his eyes upon," she said with a personal justification that deceived neither of them.

"May I be ever a credit to your tender gardening," and So Wo Loie bowed in mock reverence just as Li Sing came timidly out into the garden.

Starting slightly, she looked from one to the other. "The Kitchen Gods require your attention," she said timidly to So Wo Loie.

But as she stepped forward So Fi held her back with a gracious gesture. "I will answer their call," she said, and disappeared into the gloom of the cooking room, leaving Li Sing looking after her in puzzled silence.

"Li Sing," So Wo Loie giggled, beckoning her, "the gods have smiled upon me."

"How?" asked the maid, suddenly sensing that something unusual had happened.

"I have taken the eye of the mandarin. Even now he is bargaining for my removal to his *yamen*."

"A number two wife?" asked Li Sing eagerly.

So Wo Loie smiled cryptically and shook her head.

"Number three?" persisted the maid.

So Wo Loie flung her arms up and laughed aloud. "No, not a wife at all," she cried, "a love blossom, one to perfume his hours of ease, to gladden his inner apartment with the sweetness of my presence."

Li Sing gave a gasp of horror. "A concubine?" she breathed.

"Even so," So Wo Loie told her shamelessly.

"It is a shameful thing," and the little maid shuddered at the thought.

Not so So Wo Loie. Her eyes danced, her arms flung out as though to embrace a new freedom, something she had never known. "It is escape from this," she laughed. "I will have freedom, of a kind. I will have love, of a kind. I will escape the virtuous beatings of my august mother-in-law, the scorn of our lord for my barrenness. The memory of the past that never was shall be forgotten. My coolie blood will be no more a shame to me there than it was here, and not so much. At least my womanhood will have its use and not dry as a blighted bud because the husband of my childless widowhood binds me to a barren memory. My life will open like a flower in one man's eyes, if not the man I choose. I was not meant to wither on a lonely stem."

Something of the abandon of her words swept over Li Sing. This young mistress she had always loved, though at times she disapproved of all her thoughts along the ways of love. But now Li Sing realized a hunger of the heart that she could recognize, even though she herself might never know it. She was a slave, but her mistress was never meant for one, and with a slave's devotion the maid desired to serve her.

"Then I will share your joy," she cried; "but it will be lonely here without you."

So Wo Loie stopped and frowned. "If they but hold my price not too high," she said slowly.

"The mandarin will have his will," Li Sing assured her.

So Wo Loie smiled. "So, too, will the merchant," she replied, for well she knew that hers would not be the only gain in this transaction. "Well, at least the scorned one is valuable, and all because I put flowers in my hair and kept the laughter in my heart. The weed has made itself a blossom in the eyes of men."

So Fi tottered out of the kitchen, crossing to her own apartment. Instinctively the girls drew apart, but her voice was directed at Li Sing. "Mind the fire under the midday rice, Li Sing," she cried as she disappeared.

So Wo Loie smiled mockingly upon her departure, then turned to the maid. "See," she cried," even the

Kitchen Gods shall lack my lowly worship now. I am their drudge no longer."

"May they bless their new mistress," and Li Sing crossed to bow before them.

"Go, then, let me stay here in the sunshine of favor and become used to my exalted position by your service."

"Yes, moon-faced mistress with a silkworm's eyebrow," giggled the maid, and kowtowed mockingly.

That night, lying sleepless but happy upon her *kong,* So Wo Loie wove the lonely dreams of her maidenhood into garlands of reality. True, being a widow she might not now be a wife, but after all, even if the mandarin had taken her to his bed under the sanctity of custom, she would be no more a wife, for her heart, the heart that governed the soul of her, lay back under the blight of famine, where it had opened from the bud only to fade at the departure of him who was first of all her chosen lord. Since choice had been taken out of her hands in the first instance, she felt no compunction now in cheating the unkind gods that had cheated her. Of a necessity her soul must starve, not so her body. Yet Hing Chow's desire was no stronger than her own and no more holy. She would give him what he asked, which was not love, and in turn take what he had to give, the best substitute that fate held out.

She pictured her new quarters in contrast to her

present. No more service to the Kitchen Gods, no more haggling in the markets for the family food. The drab garb of her widowhood might be laid aside for the adornment of her person as a magnet to the eyes of her master. The inner apartment that she would rule would be a love nest, soft feathered and well adorned. The only business of her life would be to minister to pleasure, and her body would be nourished to that end by him who desired it. As for her heart, it had lain dumb so long it now raised no voice of protest, for love, real love, lay behind a veil of years, a thing seen but once and then only for an instant in the gray setting of famine. She strove to shut it out now with brighter visions, visions that contrasted sharply with the surroundings that she had known so long in the toil of useless widowhood.

As for her passage from the household of So into the official *yamen,* that was a matter of bargaining between her grasping father-in-law and the mandarin, a merchant's game for merchandise, which she had now become. Had she but borne a son to the house of So, her position in it would have been fixed. Then she had not made her marriage as much a mock to them as it had been to her. The failure of her legal lord to make her fruitful had been something they had laid to her and not to him as the years went on, and she became to them the impersonation of a bitter memory. Had she been soil his seed had fertilized, honor would have been

the wall of her protection. But she had been a fallow field, and now she was to be sold again with as little honor as she had been purchased at first; but at least this time the profit would be hers, and so she had made herself a lure to a purchaser who offered her at least something for the something that she had to give.

On these thoughts the hand of sleep laid busy fingers to weave the threads upon the loom of dreams. The pattern took the form of luxuries she had never known. Bracelets of jade, and cunning earrings, too. The lure of flowers always in her hair. Rich food, soft silks, maids to attend and guard her beauty with their care. Even as those called to the inner palaces of the Forbidden City for the pleasure of the Son of Heaven, if not to stand in honor by the Dragon Throne, so would she be in the safe haven of the *yamen.* And in the hours of easy dalliance, when Yet Hing Chow laid off his robes and thoughts of state, she with her wiles would lure material things from him, so, even should he be transferred to another district and she be left behind, she need never again feel the pinch of poverty.

Then, having been a concubine and so acknowledged, she could choose her next protector, and one to her own liking, a boon not granted her staid sisters of a married state. For in Yet Hing Chow's household she would be a wind flower, blown in by the breath of passion and blown out on the breeze

of change if he should be removed, transferred or honored with a better district. It was the only choice Celestial women had, and in love matters their only freedom, though the door through which they passed to gain it was the door of shame. But So Wo Loie's starved youth, that love had wakened only to mock, now laughed at shame and made it serve her own ends.

So passed the night, its dim corridors of dreams lit by the soft lanterns of anticipation, and when the sun arose thus rose So Wo Loie, as bright of face, and her voice mocked the birds that shrilled their joyous greetings to the dawn. Her morning tasks partook of playfulness to her, things to be done for the last few times that would add salt and savor to idleness which others would work for her that she might enjoy. And so she mocked the Kitchen Gods with sham devotion, then hurried out to feed the idle goldfish, her real playfellows, and whisper secrets to the lotus buds before she plucked them for her hair, this time in no fear that their resting place would be rudely disturbed.

Nor was the harsh voice of her mother-in-law raised in sharp commands to her all morning. She took her own way through leisurely duties, for habit as yet had not established idleness for her. She giggled with Li Sing, telling the slave that when she was the love flower of the mandarin she would make him buy her as her own personal maid, for her friend—and at that her one friend—she had always

been in this unhappy household. And so the scruples of Li Sing drew back before the coming change that she would love to share, and much they planned together as they flitted here and there about the household, for once left in each other's company by the Mean One.

It was mid-morning when a knock came at the gate. Li Sing made haste to answer it, and into the garden stepped one in the dress of an Outside Kingdom man, a man with a strong face burned by the sun and wind of wide waters. His form was sturdy and comely, and about him was an easy freedom of manner that spoke of one whose eyes look upon broad and shifting horizons, whose home was rocking planks, windshifted with his wandering business.

"Is this the abode of the worthy *hong* keeper and merchant So Ling Gee?" he asked with a deep voice meant to carry commands about in the noise of rushing winds.

So Wo Loie stepped just then out of the kitchen. The voice struck on her ear and set a chord of memory vibrating. She pressed her hand against her heart that leaped suddenly at something in the past now falling like a shadow on the present.

"It is, most worshipful master," she heard Li Sing telling him.

"I did not find him at his *hong*," the stranger said. "If he is within, pray tell him that Ho Fah Lee, the master of a junk, is here with a cargo for him."

The name confirmed the memory of the voice to So Wo Loie. Even before she stepped out of the concealing shadow of the wall she saw his form and face, again fixed in her mental vision across the years of change.

"Will your honorable worship step within his poor abode while I see if the master is here?" Li Sing asked him, when So Wo Loie came forward, her widening eyes upon the stranger's face.

"Li Sing, attend the Kitchen Gods. I will speak with the stranger," for stranger his manner, if not her eyes, proclaimed him.

Li Sing withdrew and left them. So Wo Loie looked full into the mariner's face, but in his eyes there was no hint of recognition, and so in a moment she dropped hers.

"You wish to see my worthy father-in-law?" she inquired.

"I would speak to the worthy merchant So Ling Gee," he told her.

"He is the honorable same." But instead of hastening to summon him, as the captain expected, she raised her eyes to his and inquired, "Do you come from far?"

He looked her over curiously, then his eyes softened, for her beauty pardoned any seeming lack of hospitality or overstep of custom. "Up the river from the sea," he answered her. "I have a cargo on my junk."

"You have been here before?" she pursued.

He knit his brows a moment, then answered slowly, "Four years ago, in the time of famine."

"The time of famine," she echoed dreamily. "Yes, I remember you, but you do not remember me," and she smiled as though to aid, while she did not quite pardon the offense.

Still he was puzzled, and his face showed it. "I was not in the village then," he said, almost in apology. "I was farther up the river, even into the far and pleasant country of the hills. When I returned in those dire times my junk stranded on a bar above, and when I got it off I left the land as soon as might be."

"And went cargoless down the river," she prompted.

A sudden shadow crossed his face. "Yes, the cargo that I wished to take back was a light one."

So Wo Loie's heart leaped. He had not forgotten, then, even if he had not recognized her. Time and youth and food had done their work for her, rounding and maturing her form, smoothing the pinch of famine from her face, waking the tea-roses in her cheeks that the dust of drouth had covered then. And yet he remembered that maid who sat in misery before the squalid hut beneath the Rain God's curse. Even that withered bud he would have taken to wear upon his breast, though he did not now recognize in her the flower opening to a fuller promise than the folded bud had hinted. Slowly a smile crept from her heart to her lips,

lifting them to show the white kernels of her teeth beneath, teeth small and even as the rice that was the price he offered for her then, a high price to one far from home in a hungry land, and with many mouths to feed out of a small store.

"The cargo you would have carried was a light one," she echoed. "But even so its price was heavy, for it was just two *piculs* of rice."

His brows drew together sharply. The dust of years rolled back from the pleasant garden where they now stood and settled on another picture, one dry, sun baked and squalid, yet holding in its soiled frame an image of what to him had been love, or at least the promise of it. An ache that the years had dulled gripped suddenly at his heart.

"How do you know that?" he asked sharply.

Her eyes held his a moment. A film, like the dust of drouth, clouded them. Then she tossed her head as though throwing it out of them, and with a hint of mischief adding piquancy to the smile she strove to subdue she answered demurely, "That was what I was worth then."

He looked her over, hardly crediting the change. Indeed, now he saw he had not been mistaken in the bud that the years had opened to such lovely promise.

"The Drouth Flower!" he cried in pleased recognition.

"The coolie weed your memory watered," she corrected.

He looked about at her new setting, the evidence of wealth on every side, the lotus bordered goldfish pond, the twisted garden walks leading from the women's apartment to the Ancestral Hall beyond.

"Transplanted now in this rich garden," he breathed, realizing that the merchant who had overbid him then was the same to whom his present cargo was consigned.

"My price was heavier than your purse," she sighed.

"But not than my desire," he cried. "I offered all I could then, and more. Your father would not take my cash, and I was far from home and short of rice."

She dropped her head. "It was the Rain God's curse."

"Upon us both," he added.

She did not dare to answer this. Her heart fluttered wildly through a pause as all the wasted years between their meeting rose to mock her. How much she dared not think, and so, controlling her voice with an effort, she asked: "Perhaps you have an honorable wife now?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes roving over her hungrily. "No," he replied slowly, "the drouth withered the bud of my love." Then, with almost a touch of irony, he asked: "How is your honorable husband?"

She bent her head with demure reverence, "Dead, I thank you."

"Dead?" he cried.

She nodded without raising her head. "Yes, I am his disconsolate virgin widow."

"His *virgin* widow?" and his voice rose in incredulous surprise.

"Yes, honorable sir," she replied softly, still with bowed head. "I prayed very hard to the Goddess of Mercy as they dragged me to this house. She must have heard my prayers, for even as I arrived my worthy lord departed to his ancestors without his even possessing me."

"The Goddess of Mercy is kind," he told her gravely.

So Wo Loie lifted her face to him smiling. "You sail under the shadow of her sleeve."

Her eyes met his without faltering. He looked deep into them and then his own answered her smile. "By that token," he said slowly, "I carry her image ever with me," and from his jacket he drew a tiny statue of the many-handed one; "since through her I have lived in your memory, I give you the talisman," and he held it out to her.

She took it with trembling hands, then fell upon her knees, holding it against her fluttering breast. "By my prayers to her the years, like clouds, have rolled away, showing me again the sunshine of your face," and at that she rose, hiding the image in her jacket near her heart.

His face lit up at her reception of his gift. "Your price has no doubt risen with your beauty,"

he said eagerly; "but with the years my wealth has mounted too, for the goddess has been kind upon my voyaging. You have exchanged one house for another, but, by Kwan Yam's protection, not your heart. Your body is as virgin as your soul, therefore I would defy custom. 'What happens in Kwang Tung is not known in Famosa,' and no phœnix sits upon my sea bird's nest."

"My lord still desires me, then?" and So Wo Loie looked with a sidelong glance into his face that would have lit desire if it had not been there.

"Even as my number one wife," he told her eagerly. "As a trader I will bargain with your august father-in-law. But first, for the favor of the Goddess of Mercy to us, I would burn sacrifice to the departed lord that he did not possess you," and he stepped before the tablet of memory of So Wing High, adding a fresh punk to the dead ones below it.

"I am honored with my husband's memory," said So Wo Loie, "and by it. But my worthy father-in-law is abroad upon his business, and if he is not in his *hong* you must find him among the traders in the Street of the Markets."

"That I did not find him at his *hong* made me seek him at his house," and Ho Fah Lee smiled. "Kwan Yam is my guide ashore as well as afloat, for she led me to you. Now it is not only my present cargo I will see to, but the delayed one that waits me here. Until I see your honorable father-in-law, who must be kinder than your father was,

I leave you in the goddess's care," and with a low bow he took his way through the blue gate and turned his steps toward the Street of the Markets.

It was only after he left that So Wo Loie took the image of the All Compassionate One from her breast and eyed it doubtfully. To be sure, the honorable lord of her heart had been led to her, but not until she sat under the shadow of the peacock's feather, for now before the eyes of So Wo Loie rose the vision of the mandarin whom she had inflamed. But yesterday he had been a means of deliverance, a substitute of love, a door of freedom from her wasted life. Now that the lord of love himself knocked at that door, perhaps So Wo Loie's very eagerness had placed a sinister figure in his way and hers.

But the hopefulness of youth stilled that fear, if not to utter unconsciousness, at least somewhat to her peace. Nevertheless, she went about her household tasks less joyfully, nor did she say aught to Li Sing, her confidante, of the stranger, nor the import of his visit. That lay before Kwan Yam until the mariner might see her father-in-law. Yet if four years had not lessened her desirability in his eyes, they must have raised it, and though her price had since advanced, so, too, had his fortunes. As for the mandarin, with love before her, he became a figure only of lust and one that shamed herself in her own eyes that she had roused it. The image of

the Goddess of Mercy lay against her heart, every beat of which became a prayer.

Meanwhile Ho Fah Lee searched through the town for So Ling Gee, finally catching him within the *hong,* to which he had returned. Even as the mariner in his garden, so recognition was clouded by the dust of years in the eyes of the merchant. He saw only a junk captain whom he had been expecting, whose craft lay in the river ready for the sampans to bear the cargo to the *hong* dock.

"Searching for you through the town, I am but newly from your pleasant household, where I was told the worthy merchant So Ling Gee would be found in the Street of the Markets, so on your footsteps I salute you at the shrine of your business joss."

"I am overjoyed that my mean abode was honored by your presence," and So Ling Gee bowed over his clasped hands. "Since I was not there to offer you punk for my family joss, may you honor me by burning one to the joss of my *hong,*" and he indicated the altar of trade.

Ho Fah Lee bowed before it, lighting the proffered offering. "I am much honored," he informed the merchant, "for my first business with you pertains to your *hong* and not your household. I am Ho Fah Lee, junk owner and captain, trusted with a cargo for you by the Most August Fat See Lo of

the glorious city of Shanghai. Here are his sailing orders committing the merchandise to my care," and he drew a roll of rice paper from his sleeve, presenting it to So Ling Gee, "and upon its safe delivery recommending that you entrust a counter-cargo to my return trip."

The merchant unrolled the bills of lading, glanced hurriedly through them and took note of the signature of the consignee, then he turned a smiling face to the waiting cargo carrier. "In the name of my illustrious friend, I welcome you not only to my *hong* but to my home. I trust the wind and waves were kind upon your voyaging."

"The smile of the Goddess of Mercy was upon me all the way, and even here," he pointed to the temple of the All Compassionate One standing across the crowded square from the *hong* itself, "she has not deserted me. In her name I wish the glory of a hundred sons to your illustrious name and house."

So Ling Gee sighed and shook his head sadly. "The gods have frowned upon my fatherhood. My only son was gathered to his ancestors in the year of the great drouth."

"Then there is no flower to brighten your household?" inquired the mariner solicitously, for he was not supposed to have met So Wo Loie, or meeting her, custom, which she was ever defying, should have forbidden her to discuss intimate family matters with any man.

The merchant frowned. "Only the despicable widow of my son lives to mock me," he returned. "Hers is the only shadow that darkens my courtyard."

Now Ho Fah Lee, being an Outside Kingdom man, made a bold stroke and came straight to the point without wandering through the pleasant paths of etiquette. "I would remove that shadow from your house," he said boldly.

So Ling Gee looked at him sharply, but Ho Fah Lee hurried on. "I met her in the garden of your house. It was she who directed my feet to follow you. She was moon-faced and comely, and if she is a shadow in your house, thanks to her widowhood, and being barren through the death of your beloved son, I would bear her from your sight that she makes painful with her presence. There is no woman in my inner apartment. I am a wanderer and much away from home, but I would have one there to boil my rice between voyages."

Now this sudden proposition disturbed the calm of the merchant's mind. What had the maid been up to—sing-song tricks with another man as well? A loose and wanton person she was, intent upon bringing shame upon his house and the memory of one she should have venerated. The baggage had best be out of it, but at a price. Now if this mariner, this wandering half foreign devil, for all he was a subject of the Imperial Son of Heaven, had also cast amorous eyes upon this baggage, it might be

taken into account with the mandarin as well. So while he appeared to hesitate he was merely pondering.

"The phœnix nests but once. She is the widow of my son," he hesitated, "a fledgling of the phœnix bird."

Ho Fah Lee took this as a kowtow to custom, a gesture that his outside province need not make. "We have a saying in my island home," he told the merchant, " 'What happens in Kwang Tung is not known in Famosa.' It is most true, O August Sir, and so our customs vary from your own, as indeed do those of many provinces, the which I know, having often visited them. Therefore, though it might offend manners here, it will not there. I will take your phœnix bird for my number one wife. Here she lives, as you have said, a shadow upon your house. There she will be the lantern that illuminates my inner apartment. Her widowhood makes her less a daughter than if she had borne your house a son. If she may go with me she will be less a reminder of your loss, and I will make her absence bright with silver for your chest."

So Ling Gee considered this a moment. "What will you offer for her?" he asked.

"What was your marriage price for her?" the mariner returned.

"A question is no answer to a question," the merchant informed him. "For four years have I tenderly nourished the bud of her beauty to blossom

in my house. Her memory is wound about with that of my dear departed son. All these things have value."

"Well I know that, August Sir," and Ho Fah Lee bowed with a reverence he did not feel, looking back to the same bargaining between them four years ago, but keeping his tongue in the soft tones of an apparent ignorance, for he too was a trader. "I am not a rich man. My junk is all that I possess. My crew are sturdy and their bellies look to me for filling. Yet your love blossom is fair in my eyes, and I will offer a good price. I will receipt the bills for the cargo you hold there in your hands if she is the freight that I may carry back with me."

"The bargain for the cargo was struck by my illustrious friend when it was loaded," objected So Ling Gee.

"Yes," Ho Fah Lee conceded, "and it is set down there in the bills. That I can offer and no more. It is a goodly price."

So Ling Gee considered a moment. "You are not the only bidder," he said slowly.

The mariner's face did not betray the fact that this maid, even though now a wife, had been bidden for against him before. But she was a widow, and as a widow valueless in the matrimonial market of the district. "Is my competitor of this province?" he asked.

So Ling Gee inclined his head in assent.

"Then he cannot offer what I do for the glory of your house," Ho Fah Lee reminded him. "I offer honorable marriage. You would not dispose of your son's widow otherwise. I am an honorable mariner, not a flower-boat dealer."

"No more is he who finds her fair in his eyes also," replied So Ling Gee somewhat nettled, for this man spoke the truth, and already the merchant saw danger to his face, even at the gain of his purse. "I must have time to think over your offer. The junk is not yet unloaded. We have a space in which to consider. A merchant weighs all offers for the goods he has for sale."

Ho Fah Lee saw that he was disposed to haggle, and if, as he said, there was another rival in the field, the price would undoubtedly be raised. "Think of the cargo you return and I will see what can be done with that."

So Ling Gee had thought even farther than that. "To-morrow we will talk more upon the matter," he said slowly. "In the meantime my clerk will attend upon your coolies at the unloading."

"To-morrow, then, I will again see you at your *hong*. Peace be upon your household," and Ho Fah Lee bowed over his clasped hands.

So Ling Gee returned the salute. "May the Luck God sit forever in the shadow of your sail, and may the eyes of your junk never be blind."

The mariner turned from the *hong* and made his way across the Street of the Markets, bowing rever-

ently as he passed the temple of Kwan Yam, whose peaked roof rose above the huddle of shops, over which it cast a kindly shade, stretching even to the *hong* beside the river landing. It seemed a kindly omen to him, the presence of the All Compassionate One standing so close to the merchant who controlled the object of his desire. Ho Fah Lee forgave him even the former bargaining, for into those hands a bud had fallen only to open later to full flower in his own.

He sought a little tea house overlooking the river where he might view his junk, its nose pointed up against the current while it rode at anchor. Already the sampans were putting out to transfer its cargo to the shore, and the boatmen were chattering and quarreling like monkeys with the busy crew at work upon the deck. As for Ho Fah Lee, this was a time for leisure and for dreams. His anchor was cast in a pleasant place, and once up again he would spread his sail to the breeze of luck and love. There was cash enough in his chest below decks, and stores in plenty for a pleasant trip downstream. He would enrich his heart and house more than his purse, and he was well content, for the island nest of the sea bird had waited long for the mate he would now bear back to it.

So Ling Gee went back, however, to his merchandising. His only dreams were of *taels* and cash, into which his mind converted all things, not excluding flesh and blood. Everything he had was

for sale, including honor, though that was a thing to be used for bargaining. His face was that of a merchant, as was his heart, now that his house, by the death of his son, transferred all his attention to his *hong*.

No doubt Yet Hing Chow realized this when he sallied out of the *yamen* and took his way through the streets with his tattered but nevertheless grandiloquent train. With much noisy pomp he arrived at the *hong* by the riverside. So Ling Gee received him with a show of double deference befitting a return visit, but beneath the ceremony with which he conducted him into his counting room there was the cunning of one appraising a customer. The outward forms of custom being observed, they drained their tea bowls and came to the real point of their meeting.

"My *hong* is doubly honored with my house by your August Presence," the merchant remarked as the mandarin's eyes took slow inventory of the housed goods.

"And further honor is in store for you," Yet Hing Chow promised impressively.

So Ling Gee forbade to press the question, but waited courteously, as though letting the statement sink in. "I have come with the price of your love flower," and motioning to the head lictor, who stood behind him, he signed for that worthy to place a musically clinking sack upon the table between them. "Six hundred *taels* to show my generosity," and he

flecked the pouch with his hand so that it clinked again most seductively.

So Ling Gee eyed it through an impressive pause, then he spoke slowly. "Most honored sir, my eyes are dazzled by your magnificence, but I must hold my son's memory above my own gain. I have an offer of marriage for her. She may now go from my house to a far distant province, and my face will be safe with her secure position."

Yet Hing Chow considered this statement for a moment, his eyes meanwhile roaming about the *hong.* Only too well he realized at their first interview that So Ling Gee was, above all else, a merchant. Though he would consider family honor, that was not entirely bound up in the person of his daughter-in-law, the less so since she was that in name only and had not the claim of motherhood to secure her an honored position in the house.

"Is the marriage money more than I have offered?" he asked.

So Ling Gee did not meet his eye, but instead let his own gaze wander through the open window to the river where the sampans were even now lightering the goods from Ho Fah Lee's craft to the jetty beside the *hong,* where the coolie porters waited expectantly for the clerk to assign them loads.

"Even the price of the cargo of goods now lying in the river in the junk that has just come up," and he waved his hand to the vessel visible through the open window.

Yet Hing Chow followed the gesture with a frown. As one of the official class he had little patience with the haggling minds of trade. Nevertheless, when one desired goods one must give value in return, unless one might scare off a competitor. This gave rise to a pertinent question. "And who is he who dares to bid against the district mandarin?" he demanded.

"Even the captain of the junk," So Ling Gee replied quietly. "He is an Outside Kingdom man," he hastened to explain, "and in his province he will not lose face by taking a widow for a number one wife. It is more to the honor of my house that she enter another from the red chair, for she is even as my own daughter, bound to me by the memory of my son."

"His memory lives only in descendants," Yet Hing Chow reminded him. "And she has borne him none."

So Ling Gee sighed reflectively, but pulled a long face and put on the air of an affectionate parent. "Even for her own sake I value her," he said, which was indeed true, but only for the price, which he was inflating, with another bidder and an honorable offer that had to be overcome with silver.

Yet Hing Chow considered this through a pause. The fact that the blossom he coveted had filled the eye of another made her now doubly desirable. Perhaps, too, So Ling Gee really had a lurking fondness for the transplanted bud that he had reared

in his family garden, a parental thing that had grown through the years, and to which the memory of his son was but a trellis on which it climbed. These things had value, and the girl was as a flower to the eye, even to a parental gaze. Yet flowers had their price, and honor too, as his official position had taught him. In this it seemed a case of raising both.

"Then I will lift the price a hundred *taels,*" he said slowly. "As for this mariner," he went on, shifting from trade to sentiment, if that was to weigh in the scales, "what is he to you? Once his junk weighs anchor he is gone and with him your treasure. But I am here," and the mandarin spread his hands in a magnificent gesture. "Under my protection your *hong* will flourish as never before." He leaned across the table and dropped his voice to a confidential tone. "The tax list is in my hands, and you have many goods. Besides, there is the rice the troops must eat, and I am the purchaser and fix the price. Now were the daughter-in-law of my most august friend the lily of my inner apartment, her perfume would soften my thoughts to one who had nourished her bloom and at last given it into my hands," and he leaned back with a smile that included So Ling Gee in a tender relation along with the object of their discussion.

The merchant considered this silently, then slowly opened his lips. "And seven hundred *taels* besides all favors?" he asked shrewdly, so that there might be no misunderstanding.

"I could not break my word and lose my face," the mandarin assured him.

Still So Ling Gee hesitated, for he wished his show of reluctance to have all the marks of sincerity. "Only to a friend near my heart would I trust her," he faltered.

"Am I not your friend?" and Yet Hing Chow's voice was almost as tender as though for years they had been bound by the closest ties of chaste affection.

"I know that you will prove to be," So Ling Gee assured him, "and therefore my will shall be yours."

Yet Hing Chow smiled benignantly, licked his lips and returned to the real import of his thoughts. "I will prepare my inner apartment for her reception."

"I will prepare her for the honor you bestow upon her," the merchant replied, not to be outdone as a preparer.

"The *yamen* gate stands ever open to my friend," the mandarin informed him with subtle meaning.

"And my house is the abode of your favor," So Ling Gee returned.

Yet Hing Chow rose and signaled to the head lictor that the interview was over. That worthy went without and collected the runners and retainers from the looting of the stalls in the Street of the Markets. With cracking whips and beating gongs they made ready for the departure of the Great Presence, apprising the villagers of the honor their eyes were to receive with the official procession.

"In two days after the official reception," Yet Hing Chow informed his host, "I shall send for her."

So Ling Gee clasped his hands and bent low over them in formal salute. "She shall come to dwell as a sealing bond between us," he promised.

"Peace be upon our houses," and in the formal farewell there crept a note of intimacy as the mandarin stepped into the street to mount his chair and give the populace a treat with the glory of his passing.

So Ling Gee looked after him with the faint shadow of a triumphant smile. Then his eyes strayed to the sweating coolies toiling up the jetty from the sampans, whining their song of labor as they lightened the junk. But no thought of the mariner entered into his calculations. The mandarin had overbid him, and as a merchant he was to take the highest price the market offered for the merchandise he had to sell. Junks there were in plenty to carry cargoes, but few there were in official places where one might curry favor except by "squeeze." He dismissed the captain from his mind, gave his clerks orders to unload the goods with all possible speed and took himself back to his own house for a bowl of rice, a quiet pipe, and perhaps to give instructions to his daughter-in-law as to the wise disposition he had made of her future, one by which both, but particularly he, would profit.

The mariner's departure on his hopeful mission left So Wo Loie time for some reflection, and that not of the most sanguine order. She flitted about her morning tasks, her heart now pulsing high with hope, now fluttering with a vague fright at the turn events had taken with her. Of a certainty, though, her father-in-law would consider the honorable offer of her lover, if only for the sake of the reflection on the house. He would gain by her loss, not only in *taels* but in face, for with her removed as a wife she would cease to shadow the household, and the mandarin's offer of protection was one that might set the tongues of gossip awag to the discredit of the merchant's face, even though she knew So Ling Gee to think less of that than he did of his cash chest, for all the boasts he made to the contrary.

Nevertheless, her song was less gay and her heart less light after she had time for these reflections. Love was less sure of its own security, now that she had put her person to the test of wantonness in the eyes of lust that the mandarin had cast on her. The very attitude of the rulers of her destiny now lost their savor. She would that she had let her blood run cooler until its flame might have had the saving shelter of sanctity, and so she hugged the image of the All Compassionate One against her fluttering heart and mutely prayed to it; nor as yet did she take even Li Sing into her uneasy confidence.

It was with something of relief that she saw So Ling Gee enter the gate and cross the garden. Be-

fore he stepped into the Ancestral Hall she had halted him with her voice. "Most honorable father-in-law."

So Ling Gee turned to her. "Yes?" he replied.

"An honorable stranger sought you here this morning, an Outside Kingdom man, a mariner from a far province, who desired much to see you."

Something in the agitation of her manner caused him to eye her narrowly. She dropped her eyes out of which the boldness of yesterday seemed to have suddenly fled. He let her confusion gain control under his gaze, nor did he ease it with speech himself. At last she broke the awkward pause. "You —you saw the stranger?"

"Yes," he replied quietly, not helping her farther.

"Had—had the august stranger aught to say to you of me?" she asked timidly.

"What if he did? That is my concern."

At this she realized that there had been a discussion between them. She must know its outcome, she must know it at once, for on it hung all her future, the future she had risked so wantonly only the day before. It gave her courage, a courage that she knew the value of now, as she knew the value of herself.

"Mine also, honored parent," she said boldly. "I have been faithful to the memory of my departed lord, your adored son, and ever mindful of the house of So, of which I am a humble part."

"It is your wifely duty," he reminded her.

"Even so," she hurried on. "And I have thought, since my most revered mother-in-law has told me of the honor the most august mandarin paid my poor beauty, that, as my husband's widow, I may not accept the shelter of his *yamen*."

So Ling Gee knit his brows. "And why not, pray?" he inquired sternly.

So Wo Loie began to be fearful of her ground, she felt it slipping from beneath her feet; nevertheless, she planted them now on family honor, which even her father-in-law must respect, and took a firm stand. "Having been the name wife of the house of So, I could not, in memory of that honor, accept less than marriage and keep my face."

At this a quick suspicion flashed into So Ling Gee's mind. She must have seen this stranger before, she must have had speech with him, and the gods only knew what else, to have reversed the position that she herself had made and was now attempting to refute.

"What made you think the stranger offered a marriage price for you?" he demanded sharply.

"Because he would do not less than he has done before," she told him defiantly.

"What do you mean before? When has he seen you?"

"Long ago, before I came here, in the time of famine, at my father's house."

So Ling Gee frowned again, then to his eyes came the picture—the wattle hut, the bared teeth of the

bar holding a junk in its grip; the wailing of the mother in the hut, the cry for rice, and this huddled girl whose strength defied the famine and had given So Ling Gee hope of fruitful ground for his weak seed, only to meet with disappointment once more at this late day, and from the very man who had bid against him then, for in this present stranger he, too, now recognized again the captain of that junk.

"So that was the man?" he cried. "He tried to buy you then so as to cheat my son. How do I know but what he put some devil's charm upon him for the loss. If I thought that—" he sprang at So Wo Loie with such a fury in his eyes that she cowered back with a quick cry.

"Oh, no, no, most honorable father. He has but seen me once. He did not know your son. See," and she pointed to the memorial tablet before which the offering yet smouldered, "he has lit punk to his memory. He would honor me with a more decent offer than the mandarin has made!"

So they had talked it over, this Outside Kingdom barbarian and this wanton who disgraced the name of daughter in his house. Now to gain her ends, whatever they were, she would stand upon an honor she had never before shown, just when she had become of some value in a family where, up to now, she had been but a gaping mouth. She thought that she could think. Preposterous! He must show her whose will was the law to her, and what that law was.

"How dare you wag your tongue in this affair?" he barked. "You will go as I see fit and where I have a mind to send you. Now about your work, or your worthy mother will teach you reverence to the will of others with the bamboo," and he clapped his hands in signal for his midday rice and entered the Ancestral Hall, leaving So Wo Loie to ponder on the cloud settling suddenly over her hopes.

Li Sing, hurrying out after serving the master, found her weeping in a corner of the garden. Surprised, she cried, "Worthy mistress, why is the dew of sorrow upon the lily?"

"Oh, Li Sing," she sobbed, "the smile of the Goddess of Mercy is hidden by the shadow of the peacock's feather."

"Has your worthy father-in-law refused you to the mandarin?"

"No, no," So Wo Loie wailed, "he has returned. He offers me honorable marriage, he will make me his number one wife, but my father-in-law frowns upon him."

"Who, the mandarin?" asked the puzzled maid.

"No, no, the stranger. It was he, the patron of the Goddess of Mercy, my lover of the time of famine," So Wo Loie chattered incoherently.

Li Sing regarded her in perplexity. "I will bow my head and heart to the will of my elders before I would know this thing called love," she sighed.

"But I will not," cried So Wo Loie, dashing the tears out of her eyes.

Li Sing shook her head. "No, no, they must follow the path of filial duty," and she departed to her tasks, thankful that her own empty heart knew no such problems.

But again So Wo Loie's appeared in the person of So Ling Gee as he made ready to depart to his *hong*. She stopped him, for she must know her fate, though already she feared it.

"My father," she faltered, "will you see the mandarin again?"

"I have already seen him," he replied, "and he has done us both much honor," and she knew by this that some bargain had been concluded.

"But I cannot accept," she cried in open rebellion. "This stranger from Famosa offers marriage. That is an honor to the house of So, the other would be dishonor!"

"I am the judge of that," So Ling Gee informed her coldly. "You are but to obey."

So Wo Loie forgot all discretion, all fear for the moment, save that of the future. "I will not," she cried passionately. "I claim the right of my widowhood!"—the one right she had now to stand on. "I will be an honorable wife," she declared, forgetting that she had never really been a wife, least of all in thought until just now. "I will not be a concubine. My husband's shade will protect me. I will go to honor, but naught else."

"The august mandarin Yet Hing Chow has honored our house," replied So Ling Gee, his dignity

striving for mastery with his rising anger. "You will perfume his inner apartment and thus sweeten the house you leave. This stranger is nothing to me——"

"But he is to me!" So Wo Loie interrupted him.

He looked at her blazing eyes, her flushing cheeks, the wantonness of her pose. She had used those very things to entrap one man to So Ling Gee's profit, and now she refuted it and him for this river pirate, this sea bird, this Outside Kingdom barbarian, who had bewitched her at first and no doubt laid a curse upon his own son that never made him her husband. Well, she would pay for it now, pay for it in the bed of Yet Hing Chow, and the merchant would receive his pay for all she had cost him. If he might not sell her to a flower boat and still retain his face, he could put her in a *yamen* at any price he chose, and already it was high.

"Shameless coolie wanton!" he cried, striking her full in the face and bringing her to her knees where she belonged. "I am the master of this house and all within. You go from it before you bring dishonor on it and me, and you go where I choose. I have spoken, you obey," and without looking back he passed through the gate, leaving her groveling beside the goldfish pool.

Beneath her sob-shaken breast she felt the image of Kwan Yam holding her heart from the stones. She rose slowly to her knees, fumbling for comfort

in her jacket. She took the image out and regarded it through the blinding rain of her tears.

"Hear me now, you are my only help," she prayed. "Give me the shadow of your sleeve."

She set the image on the rock-rimmed pool, making of it a shrine. "I have no punk to burn to you," she sobbed, "but take my tears instead." Then she dashed them away and looked wildly about her. Her eyes fell on the tablet of her husband, the punk lit there by her lover still smouldering. She rose quickly and snatched it away with the dead sticks of burnt out sacrifices, offering them instead at the goddess's feet. "By the memory of a marriage that never was, hear me, hear me!" and she stuck them into the loose earth before her, then bent her head in the dust. "A sign, a sign, give me a sign that you hear me, O Most Compassionate One!"

As she raised her head the sticks fell together, and a little wind springing up fanned the all but dead punk so that they burst into flame. So Wo Loie uttered a glad cry. "Oh, you have spoken, you have spoken, Holy Mother!" and once more her head went down and the tears flowed faster, but this time they washed away her fears.

孔雀翎影
THE SHADOW OF
THE PEACOCK'S FEATHER

THE SHADOW OF THE PEACOCK FEATHER

THE fortune-telling booth of Wang Ho stood at the head of the Street of the Markets, where the shadow of the temple of the Goddess of Mercy fell across it in the afternoon, thereby protecting it not only from the wiles of evil, but also from the fiery arrows of the Sun God. Under the tattered umbrella hung with tinkling devil charms the old man dozed between customers, watching the world go by through round, horn-rimmed glasses.

A kindly seer was old Wang Ho, a wily necromancer skilled in the arts of *fung shui,* versed in the circling movements of the stars and their effect upon the terrestrial world, a sand writer, a scribe, but most of all the Eye of the Gods, reading their will in the bamboo sticks that were his chief means of peering into the hidden things of the future, attendant upon the lucky days decreed of Heaven. He claimed to have several personal *Yaukweis* of his own, of which his enemies stood in considerable awe, though he preferred to practice the more gentle arts of his craft. A dabbler in herbs and simples, many of which were not so simple, he occasionally usurped the business of the local doctor when that worthy was unfortunate in his diagnoses. All in all, Wang Ho was a man of parts, and if a bit of

a charlatan, he performed with a certain weighty dignity that gained him much respectful honor and sufficient cash for his simple needs.

The corner that he had usurped for his own was the busiest one in the village, and though the worthy fortune teller appeared to doze much between the practicing of his art, his apparent slumbers were those of a fox, for one eye was always open behind the camouflage of his glasses. Also, his acute ears were attuned to every voice besides those of the gods with which he communed, and naught of a private or personal nature transpired in the village without coming to his attention in one way or the other. Of all these things he made quiet mental notes that helped out his apparent magic.

When the junk of Ho Fah Lee dropped anchor in the river he noted with deep satisfaction that the captain had rounded the Tiger Head and come back downstream under the sign of luck. Also, when that worthy sought the tea house he made obeisance as he passed the temple of Kwan Yam, thereby proving himself a patron of Wang Ho's special deity and therefore worthy of attention. Besides, the old man had a liking for the Outside Kingdom men who came in contact with the fair-haired barbarians, for whose magic the fortune teller had a wholesome respect, for he himself was muchly traveled, having been to the great waters and up and down the coast on pilgrimages to many shrines.

Though Ho Fah Lee knew it not, Wang Ho im-

mediately took note of the time of his arrival, the signs of wind and water attendant upon it, then figured the position of the stars, the state of the moon, that guardian of tides and currents, and began calculating a lucky date for his return sailing. This clouded the usually moonlike placidity of his round face, for even though the mariner had arrived under the favorable sign of the Tiger, had observed the shifting *fung shui* of the current and backed down with it before he came to anchor, the signs for him ashore were not propitious. In vain the old man studied them, tiny wrinkles of perplexity gathering about his eyes as his forehead drew down into a puzzled frown.

The shadow of the temple of the goddess crept across his work. It too became a symbol, but one that he could not read as yet. Important he decided, for it bespoke a feminine influence; but what feminine influence could the stranger have in the village? His errand was obviously business. His outward demeanor was calm and unruffled, even buoyant, which was not the case of a man in love, and, besides, he did not carry his love here, and, being a stranger, could not as yet have selected a blossom from the village gardens. The old man sighed and studied the signs again, casting them over for anything that might have escaped him at first. Then he leaned back and fumbled through his memory for scraps of gossip to guide him, but found none. The stranger was a stranger, even to

the merchant to whom his cargo was consigned, for Wang Ho had seen So Ling Gee greet him with the ceremony accorded one who had but newly arrived from an outside province. The gods were busy with the stranger's signs, and over them all lay the shadow of the Goddess of Mercy, or was it the protection of her sleeve? Wang Ho pondered and cast the signs again.

Meanwhile the object of his speculations watched the rapid unloading of his junk from the tea house porch. The sooner that business was concluded the sooner would another be able to be brought to the merchant's attention, and then, if the kind gods willed, he would up anchor and put down the river with a sweet and personal cargo. Both delays irked him, and as the busy sampans plied to and fro he left the shelter of the tea house and, crossing the square before the temple, made his way to the *hong* of So Ling Gee.

Old Wang Ho looked up from his speculations as Ho Fah Lee passed him and watched him as he stopped and chatted with the tally clerk checking off the incoming cargo as the coolies trotted with it into the *hong*. The old man wished that his ears might span the distance, though the conversation that escaped him was commonplace enough, for Ho Fah Lee merely asked, "Is your most august master within?"

"No, most honorable captain," the clerk told

him. "He is abroad upon some business and may return at any time."

Ho Fah Lee took his pipe from his sleeve and filled it, inhaling a few short puffs, then turned away across the square in search of some diversion that might while away the time that hung heavily upon his hands and still more heavily upon his heart. Perhaps it was something of the reflection of this that made the old fortune teller accost him as he passed his booth.

"The will of the gods, honorable captain," he cried; "learn the will of the gods for a lucky day."

Ho Fah Lee stopped at the voice. His day ashore had been lucky, attended more by the smile of the goddess than by those of the gods, but in their hands lay the final issue and the day of luck on which he might depart. Of a truth one must consider all things and on the signs of them act. He smiled and threw a few cash down upon the table.

"Find me a lucky sailing date, O wise one from whom naught is hidden."

Wang Ho slowly shook out the fortune sticks, twisted them about so that chance might rule against the human will, then returned them to their bamboo tube and began slowly shaking them until one might fall upon the table with omen, good or bad.

"I am the gods' slave, not their master," he reminded the young man. "They reveal to my eyes

only what it is their desire that men should know," and he studied the stick that had fallen upon the table before him.

"What do they reveal for me?" his client asked eagerly.

The old man studied the sign frowning, then shook his head. "It grieves me that I am not the translator of good news," he replied slowly, then peered closer at the stick. "They name no lucky sailing day."

Ho Fah Lee's face fell. "Will not my business prosper, then?" he asked.

"That is not given to me to read, illustrious sir," the old man told him, still studying the stick, "but the sign is bad."

"How bad?" the mariner demanded.

"That I cannot read," and Wang Ho consulted the marker once more. "I only know the sign is bad."

"Then my cash is as ill spent as your fortune," replied the young man, somewhat nettled.

Wang Ho shook his head. "No one's cash is ill spent when given to the god's interpreter," he assured him gravely.

Ho Fah Lee laughed and turned away, making for the tea house once more, when he observed So Ling Gee entering the *hong*. The young man changed his mind and course and approached the merchant. The old fortune teller watched him, noting the eagerness of the young man's step, an

eagerness that he tried to translate, for he doubted that it pertained entirely to trade. And yet, what else, for So Ling Gee was a merchant, not the father of girls. Still, the sign before him had a feminine meaning over it and him; yes, and even over the *hong,* too, now fell the shadow of the Goddess of Mercy as the sun threw it from her temple.

Wang Ho picked up the cash the mariner had thrown upon the table and split them into two piles. One he transferred to his purse, the other he picked up and, crossing to the temple, bought a red taper with it and, lighting it, set it before the All Compassionate One, praying for a sign that she must hold, and then returned again to his table to doze behind his glasses and ponder on the mysteries revealed and unrevealed to him.

Meanwhile, within the *hong*, Ho Fah Lee was bowing to its owner. "A smiling face of the Luck God upon our affairs," he wished the merchant.

So Ling Gee inclined his head to the courtesy. "May he include us both in the benevolence of his countenance," he replied.

"He holds our affairs, one in each hand," the mariner returned. "I am speeding the unloading of my junk so that we may come to a quick settlement."

The merchant smiled. "You are a shrewd sailing master. My clerks tell me that the cargo is in excellent shape."

Ho Fah Lee bowed. "It is well that you are

pleased. In that event may I expect you to confide a return cargo to my care?" he asked.

Now So Ling Gee was a wily merchant; nor did he care to commit himself fully at any time, awaiting always the turn of events most profitable to him. This young man, he knew, was not speaking entirely in the terms of merchandise, though of a truth merchandise was in the thought of So Ling Gee, though it wore the guise of flesh and blood. As for the cargo, both ashore and aboard, that was another thing, to be approached at the proper time and at the proper rate, therefore he replied, "We will discuss that later, honorable sir."

"Also, there is the payment of this one," Ho Fah Lee reminded him with double meaning, for of a truth the old fortune teller's warning had affected him and he desired to ease his mind as soon as might be, so that his heart too might be at ease.

"That we will discuss when the goods are safely housed in my *hong,*" returned the merchant, refusing to commit himself farther.

At this Ho Fah Lee edged closer to the real matter at hand. "I was thinking more of the matter of the delicate cargo we have bargained for before."

"That too is a matter I would leave until later, when our strictly business affairs are settled," the merchant told him in his most professional manner.

Ho Fah Lee saw that nothing could be gained by attempting to hurry matters, except by his own exertions.

"As your most august worship desires," he conceded. "I will come to that as speedily as possible by getting the cargo ashore as quickly as may be," and he bowed and went out, leaving So Ling Gee to his abacus and, had he but known it, figuring of a sort that was not strictly commercial.

Ho Fah Lee wandered down to the jetty and inspected the incoming loads. Casting his eyes out across the water, he saw that the junk was now riding high, which argued that the unloading was progressing with some speed. He turned to So Ling Gee's clerk.

"How soon will the goods be ashore?" he asked.

The clerk consulted the tally sheets. "At this rate, by sundown at the latest," he told him.

The captain smiled. Perhaps, after all, the fortune teller had been wrong, for if he might hasten the unloading and receive the contract for the return cargo, he saw no reason why the merchant should refuse him his daughter-in-law, for he was saving him much cash in speed, to say nothing of the value of two cargoes, which was a wedding price quite good enough for a maid, to say nothing of a widow, who, as an asset, amounted to nothing at all, at least in the neighborhood. True, So Ling Gee had told him that an amorous eye had been turned upon the love blossom, but of a truth he did not really believe it, and had no idea that a mandarin had been the bidder against him, nor that, for a second time, he had been betrayed by a merchant

whose greed was keener than his honor; for, first of all, Ho Fah Lee was an honorable man, showing a clean face to all the world and seeing naught in the faces of others save honesty.

Besides, he had anchored under the sign of luck. The unloading had progressed with greater speed than he had hoped. He had found once more a love that had been taken from him, now given back into his hands as unsoiled as she had left them; therefore, in spite of the shadow of an evil sign, all else had worked for good, so must he speed his sailing day against his luck and thus outrun prophecy.

"Promise the coolies a bowl of rice apiece and a pot of tea if all the goods are housed before nightfall," he told the tally clerk.

"I will inform them of your generosity," the clerk replied. "They are a hungry lot and a promise to their bellies wings their feet. I can hand you the tally sheets by morning then."

"Good," laughed the mariner. "And I have no doubt there is a present for yourself aboard," and he turned back across the square once more to look for a game of dominoes in the tea house.

As he passed the table of Wang Ho he stopped again.

"Is your sight into the affairs of the gods always clear, O worthy sir?" he asked.

The old man raised his eyes and looked him over gravely through his round glasses.

"It is clouded only by their will, honorable captain," he replied.

"So far they seem to favor me," Ho Fah Lee told him. "I would not strive to cheat the gods, nor yet doubt one who is in their favor, but I must play strong upon my luck, which has been kind to me here under the goddess's shadow. My business bids fair to be soon concluded."

Wang Ho nodded his head slowly. It was given to him to see only what he could see, yet the signs of the gods seldom led him astray.

"I am but the servant of the gods," he informed the young man. "They have warned you through me. Perhaps their will shall be manifested later."

Ho Fah Lee frowned. The old man's prophecy was not to be shaken even by events. His honesty seemed to prove that the gods spoke through him, for often had Ho Fah Lee bought good fortunes that turned to lies in application. Perhaps this too might reverse itself. He dropped more cash upon the table.

"Assist me as you can, O worthy seer," he said, and turned away to the tea house.

"I will, most worshipful master," the old man cried after him, for of a truth he liked the youth and would that the sign should be favorable.

He fell to studying it again. It still was bad and more heavily shadowed by the Goddess of Mercy. He looked across to the *hong* of So Ling

Gee. Even on that the shadow fell, and the sign was evil. The merchant had always been disliked by Wang Ho, because his greed had no outlet in generosity. He had never consulted the old gentleman on any of his ventures, which seemed to prosper without the aid of the gods.

But the goddess, that was another matter. She shadowed his affairs now as well as that of the stranger; or was it because of the stranger that So Ling Gee too was to be affected, and how, since the sign was feminine? Wang Ho studied the signs again and again. But there was no answer in them. The answer lay outside the gods, in the realm of men and women. For the feminine sign is always bad. But who held it, and how, and where? That he must find, and Wang Ho was curious, curious and observant, and it was this that made him the Eye of the Gods that saw their will through men, as well as in them.

Now it chanced that So Wo Loie did not stand in as high favor with her family as she had the day before. The rebellion she had set up to the will of her august father-in-law had put her once more under the disfavor and unpleasant attention of the Mean One of the inner apartment. The fact that she had dared to question authority, to set up her own desire against the will of those under whose direction she lived, yes, and was to love, had taken away what favor she might have gained by her

frank ogling of the mandarin. That she should dare prefer a penniless mariner, penniless at least by comparison and devoid of the larger element of "squeeze," having no position or set place save the rocking planks of a junk, was, to say the least, an amazing thing and one that she must put out of her mind and heart, though the possession of the latter was something not granted to her by her present family, being laid away and presumably at rest in the grave of her husband, their departed son.

All this had been brought painfully to her attention that morning after So Fi had received her instructions as to filial conduct from their lord and master. Once more was she condemned to serve the Kitchen Gods, at least in one way, for the daily marketing was again put in her hands, hands that would have been idle if folded to the will of authority and laid in a luxuriant lap in the inner apartment of the *yamen.*

"Wench that you are, sing-song at heart, wanton and trifler with men!" So Fi had shrieked at her, piping up wrathfully after the soft cooing of instruction as to dishonor she had given her. "You would now go from our house on the junk of a river pirate who offers you what he pleases to call marriage, rather than stay in your own pleasant province under the protection of the Most High One. I will break the spirit of disobedience you have shown your worthy father, or chain you to the Kitchen Gods where you belong. Out to the mar-

keting, look you about and contrast what your life will be with us and what it will be in the worthy mandarin's *yamen;* but as to the junk, by the fire of my worthy wrath, no boat shall ever take you from us except a flower boat, and there you had been long ago if the memory of my son, whose name your conduct defames, had not made my heart soft."

In vain had Li Sing counseled obedience. "After all, what is this stranger to you, mistress mine?" she had asked. "You cannot go to him without your family's consent, and you would have gone to the mandarin with theirs or not, so your eyes told me. Forswear this love. It has no boon but untried adventure to offer any of us."

So Wo Loie smiled at both of them and held her peace. Of a truth she had made her own plight, but, having made it, so must she fashion her own escape, for love was now her guide and the Goddess of Mercy had given her a sign, therefore she must delay the mandarin's cause until that sign should point the way. She had turned her face from filial worship to the face that had returned to her across the years, and by the protection of his patroness she hugged her faith, nor would she give herself willingly into any other arms than those that first should have possessed her. If he had come now with honor in his hands, it was the goddess who had led him, and she feared her own household less than that deity's displeasure.

So with Li Sing and the market baskets she took

herself out to the daily shopping and the Street of the Markets. Even against this did the frightened maid argue, for usually she and So Wo Loie bargained shrewdly in less expensive quarters, for So Fi had an eye to the saving of every cash, even at the expense of quality.

And so it was that Wang Ho caught sight of her under the shadow of the temple and watched her, as he did all else that came within the scope of his shrewd eyes, for it was not often that the widowed daughter-in-law of So Ling Gee came into that quarter of the town. To be sure, the stalls were an excuse, but these she had not patronized often, though now she seemed to be doing it with consummate skill, from the fragments of the haggling that reached his ears.

"Three rib cuts of your most honorable pig," she was saying to Hop Lee, the butcher.

"A most wonderful pig, worshipful mistress," that worthy assured her as he deftly cut off two chops and then picked up a smaller third that had been rejected by a fastidious customer. "Giants themselves might well dine off them," and he held them up so that the smaller chop remained behind his hand. "Fifty cash," and he handed them over to the waiting Li Sing and put them hurriedly in her basket, "and only because of your illustrious house," he assured So Wo Loie.

"Fifty cash?" So Wo Loie inquired, "*Fifty* cash!" and her voice rose in outraged protest. "Because

my most honorable father-in-law is a *hong* keeper, do you think you may rob me as the pirates of the river rifle a junk?" she demanded. "Feed your miserable pig to the giants if you can find them, unless you will take thirty cash, which I offer only in the spirit of pitying charity," and she made a movement as though to take the meat out of the basket and return it to him.

"Oh, worthy mistress," and the butcher stopped her, for, though thirty cash was too low, nevertheless he would get no more if she discovered the smaller chop, "by the joss of my family altar, I am *giving* it to you at forty. But thirty, by the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy there," and he pointed to the peaked roof of the temple above them, "you are taking the rice out of my children's mouths. For the honor of your patronage, of which I have had all too little, and at a grievous loss, you may take it for thirty-five, and may the gods send me liberal customers to recompense me for my generosity."

"Thirty cash," insisted So Wo Loie, "or I shall return to our house and put one of our own fowl into the pot."

The butcher sighed resignedly. "Rather than offend your father, then, whose devoted friend I am, thirty cash," he agreed, regretting the small chop which had now defeated him, "though I accept it at the expense of my own belly," and he held out his hand for the cash.

So Wo Loie regarded the protruding roundness of that member with maliciously amused triumph. "You are lean with generosity," she told him as she reached back to receive the cash that Li Sing counted out of her basket. "Buy extra punk for your joss that he may restore your wasted frame," she advised, dropping it into his hands.

With this the two girls toddled off out of earshot of Wang Ho, to his deep regret, for the butcher had never been an ardent friend and he was much amused at his chagrin. This daughter-in-law of So Ling Gee's had a sprightly tongue and a pleasant and humorous manner. Wang Ho almost regretted that his wandering life had taken too much a toll of years in return for too little world goods, or else he might have set up a household of his own with such a woman as she would one day be, for observation more than experience had taught the seer that woman may pleasantly mould the life of a man, if she is amused in the process and will in turn amuse the one she bends to her will. What a shame that she was condemned to a barren widowhood, for her whole manner bespoke a lively interest in life and the things of life and youth, and not the least of them were love. He watched the two girls, head to head, holding some secret confab, and smiled to himself. His interest now was all in the doings of others, for it was enough to sit by the side of the street of life and watch its masses pass without mixing in the lively procession.

Li Sing was troubled at their proximity to the *hong,* in view of the turn of events at home.

"Why do we stay in the Street of Markets?" she asked fearfully. "The stalls are higher here and, besides, there is the *hong.* If your father-in-law sees you——"

"I came to burn punk in the temple there," So Wo Loie informed her. "I have already saved ten cash on the day's marketing. I must burn punk to her."

This passion for a deity not well thought of in their house terrified the maid. Already the All Compassionate One had not lived up to her name; in fact, since her advent her patronage had brought nothing but disaster, for in her shadow walked this stranger who had so affected the rebellious daughter of the house.

"If our worthy master saw you here——" Li Sing began again.

"Do you stand so," So Wo Loie commanded, placing her at the street corner so as to be in full view of the *hong* door. "If he comes from the *hong,* do you move there," and she pointed back to the butcher stall. "Turn your back so he does not recognize you; then if I come out and see you there, I will keep out of the light of his anger," and she moved away across the square.

Li Sing took her post fearfully. "Do not be long," she cried.

"No longer than a little prayer," So Wo Loie promised.

But just as she gained the temple steps, Ho Fah Lee, wearying of the tea house and its lack of company, was crossing the square to the jetty, not being able to keep away from the business of unloading. His face lit with pleasant surprise as he accosted her and sensed her errand.

"My patroness is honored by your worship," he said, smiling all too boldly at her for the place in which they stood, and also for the keen eyes of old Wang Ho, who, seeing them both standing in the shadow that had fallen across the mariner's fortune, now read in their meeting the import of the sign that he had missed.

"I am much honored by your notice," So Wo Loie told him, then dropped her eyes at her own boldness, for it was not seemly for a maid, much more a widow, to talk openly with a stranger in the street. This was her coolie blood again, rising hot and independent, defying custom and even detection in the very shadow of the goddess who was hers now, that she had been his.

"Even now I wait the conclusion of my bargaining with your father-in-law," he told her with equal boldness, for, after all, they were both of the river and born to its freedom.

"What has he said to you?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing as yet. He is a merchant and will not

commit himself until the matter of my cargo has been settled."

So Wo Loie cast quick eyes across to where the sweating coolies raced from the jetty to the *hong*.

"It is for that I came to pray," she said as she turned back with a little sigh.

"Then we will join our prayers as I would join our lives," and he made as if to go into the temple with her.

"No, no, no," she told him vehemently, suddenly realizing the danger to which she was submitting herself. "You must not talk to me thus in the public street, I beg you, my maid awaits me——" and she made a gesture to the now thoroughly terrified Li Sing, who was deserting her post of watchfulness in her excitement. "I must leave you, honored sir."

"Even my eagerness must respect your modesty," and Ho Fah Lee watched her as she mounted the low steps of the temple porch. "The incense of our prayers are one, so too must our lives soon be."

"I may not listen to you here, for my face is a mirror for every passerby to see," and if none else took notice, old Wang Ho did, piecing out the will of the gods by the action of mortals, of whom and for whom the gods themselves are born.

Ho Fah Lee smiled. "So that they see my image there, I will not mind," he told her.

But So Wo Loie was fearful now for herself. "I

pray you leave me so I may not betray myself," she begged him.

He turned away, but not to the *hong*. "May it be our last parting," and So Wo Loie signaled frantically for Li Sing to join her in the shelter of the porch.

Li Sing watched the stranger depart, recognizing in him the omen of ill that was affecting her mistress's fortune. Also, she feared the shadow of the porch in which they stood, and the stranger deity that presided over it. She drew So Wo Loie down the steps onto the street again.

"Mistress, why do you court your own misfortune?" she cried. "No good can come of this. The mandarin bends your worthy father-in-law to his will. What can you do but submit?"

But with Ho Fah Lee's departure So Wo Loie had recovered much of her composure and all of her resolve.

"But I will not," she declared vehemently.

"You were ready enough before this stranger appeared," wailed the little maid.

So Wo Loie smiled. "It was different then," she said softly. "I would have gone to the mandarin on any terms to escape the slavery of the house and my widowed state. Now he who awakened my heart first is here. He offers a goodly price and honor to the house of So. My father-in-law must yield to his persuasion."

"Women are born to obey," Li Sing reminded her.

"Only the one to whom her heart bows," her mistress corrected her.

"Make your heart bow to the will of others," her counselor begged, "and win your own happiness."

"Li Sing," cried So Wo Loie sharply, "you think and speak like the slave you are!"

"Better the willing slave than the struggling captive."

"Not for me," cried the rebel. "There must be some way out."

But she saw it not, though she paced the square thinking hard, and unconsciously passed the table of the outwardly calm but inwardly alert Wang Ho.

"The will of the gods, mistress," and he cried his solicitation for trade; "learn the will of the gods."

So Wo Loie stopped, startled, for the voice had cut into her fearful musings as if in answer to them. She regarded the kindly face of the old seer, then smiled and shook her head.

"Oh, master, the gods are men," she said, more to herself than him, "and mine is a woman's problem."

Now old Wang Ho had seen many things in the last few days, and the last thing that he had seen had given him the key to the evil sign of the mariner. Not all the business of the *hong* of So Ling Gee had been in merchandise, he began to realize, nor was the stranger's whole concern for his pres-

ent cargo. A widow might not remarry, except in an outside province, and what did the mandarin at the *hong* the day before? He had paid one ceremonial visit to the merchant's house and another to his *hong*. What had a mandarin to do with merchant's affairs or merchant's families? It did not take the counsel of the gods to tell Wang Ho much, for well he knew mandarins in many places, and the more he knew them the less he loved them, with their "squeeze" and arrogance and clutching fingers. When a mandarin and a merchant got together it did no good to the price of rice or the peace of the people, and what had the slave girl said about the mandarin's will?

Much he surmised, more he would know, and so he answered slowly, "When a woman has a problem, there is always a man concerned, therefore learn the will of the gods, for they rule the hearts of men."

But So Wo Loie, always the rebel and with a mind of her own, even in holy things, made bold to disagree. "Not always," she returned. "There sits a goddess," and she pointed to the temple, "and the sleeve of her compassion encompasses all."

Wang Ho smiled and nodded. "I have sat long in her shadow. Even now it falls upon my fortune sticks. Try them," and he held out the bamboo tube to her.

So Wo Loie's rebellious manner softened. "Oh, kind sir," she said, "I have little cash, and that

saved by shrewd bargaining that I might light punk to Kwan Yam, but if she speaks through you, I give you half of them and all my gratitude," and she signaled Li Sing to take the cash from her basket.

Wang Ho accepted it, then began shaking the tube.

"May I be the bearer of good tidings," he told her kindly, "for I value your gratitude more than your cash," and as he spoke one of the sticks jumped out and fell upon the table.

So Wo Loie bent forward eagerly. "What says the sign, illustrious reader of the stars?"

Wang Ho studied it carefully, frowning the while. Li Sing held her breath and peered fearfully over her mistress's shoulder.

"It wears a shadow," Wang Ho told them.

"An ill shadow?" So Wo Loie demanded.

Wang Ho considered gravely for a moment. "There are two," he said finally. "One flickers to and fro upon an evil breath. The other creeps compassionately toward you to eat the shadow of evil, even as a dragon eats the moon."

"Yes, yes——" cried So Wo Loie breathlessly.

Wang Ho looked into her face. "The flickering shadow is a peacock's feather stirred by the breath of lust," he translated.

"Yes, yes!" she agreed. "And the kindly shadow, where does that fall from?"

He smiled on her benignantly. "Even from the sleeve of the goddess in whose shadow I sit."

So Wo Loie expelled her held breath. "Kwan Yam, the patroness of him," she said unconsciously.

Wang Ho smiled again, this time more broadly. "As I have said, daughter, there is no woman's problem where a man is not concerned."

"Yes," So Wo Loie interrupted eagerly, "but when two men are concerned over one woman——"

Wang Ho stopped her with a gesture. "When Fuh-hi invented the art of writing he made the sign of trouble two women in one house," he informed her. "For a woman's sign of trouble the gods have written two men in one woman's heart."

"But in a woman's heart there is only room for one," So Wo Loie informed him gently.

"Then cast the other out."

"But how?" she asked eagerly.

Wang Ho shook his head. Even with his lore, earthly and magic, he was getting beyond his sense of deduction.

"A man may teach the classics to a son-daughter," he smiled, "but a woman's love must give her wit to outwit a love that she does not return. A man may speak to a woman's ear, but only a woman may speak to a sister's heart. I but sit in the shadow of a goddess; behind her inner shrine are those who tend it. Seek them, my daughter, for women's problems are things that men see only the surface of, even though they be companion of the gods."

So Wo Loie smiled tenderly at him. "O Hon-

orable Old," she said, "my heart tells me that you were once young."

A gleam that answered her twinkled behind the shielding glasses. Then he resumed his dignity. "That too is hidden in the shadows," he replied solemnly. "Now seek the light," and he pointed to the open door of the temple through which the eternal tapers burned before the image of the All Compassionate One, who was a woman.

So Wo Loie bowed to him and signaling Li Sing entered the temple of the goddess. In one hand she clutched the cash with which to buy a taper, the half of which she had saved after consulting the seer. She lit the red wax roll, placed it with the others, then fell upon her face in silent prayer, for pray she must before seeking the counsel of the priestess who would instruct her.

Leaving Li Sing, a trembling sentinel, upon the porch, So Wo Loie went behind the shrine in search of the priestess. The worthy dame, sunk in her holy thoughts, looked up at the bright presence standing before her, then said with a benedictional gesture, "The peace of the Goddess of Mercy upon you, my daughter."

So Wo Loie sank to her knees and bowed her garlanded head. "It is her peace that I desire," she replied in a low voice. "Where may I find it?"

"Continually under the shadow of her sleeve," the priestess told her.

So Wo Loie sat back upon her heels. "What must I do so that the shadow will guard me?" she asked.

The Holy One looked at the world trappings of the penitent. "Turn from the world, serving her only," she counseled, "and in that service forget all else. Shave your head and put on the holy cloth of her order——"

"Shave my head?" interrupted So Wo Loie, raising her hands to the glossy rolls of her jet black crown.

"Even so," the priestess insisted. "Lay aside all outer adornments and live only for the beauty of your soul."

So Wo Loie's hands caressed the forbidden blossoms that even now nodded each side of her ears.

"Take the flowers from my hair?" she asked in a tone that implied that the blossoms would lose as much if taken from their soft resting place.

"Even so," the Holy One insisted inexorably.

"And the love from my heart?" pursued So Wo Loie, thinking not only of her love of beauty, for to her all love was now that.

"There will be no room in your heart for aught but the love of her service," her instructress insisted.

The kneeling girl sighed deeply. "The goddess asks much for the price of her peace," she complained.

"She gives peace for all that she takes away. Her compassion encompasseth the earth."

So Wo Loie dropped her eyes. "Mine is not so wide," she confessed.

"Then make it so."

A deeper sigh welled up from So Wo Loie's bosom. "It is a large thing to ask so small a heart," she cried.

"Your heart must be given to her alone," the priestess insisted.

So Wo Loie rose to her feet and shook a sorrowful head.

"Then I fear I may not enter her service," she said regretfully. Anon her manner changed to one of sudden hopefulness. "Yet cannot she be of service to me?" she asked eagerly.

The older woman smiled quietly. Something in the girl's manner touched the deep maternity with which the service of the All Compassionate One had imbued her. Here was a woman's problem brought to a feminine deity.

"What is your grief, my child?" she asked kindly.

The younger woman regarded her a moment. The priestess had suddenly become more human and less aloof. So Wo Loie felt now that she could lay her problem before her with a better understanding. She was talking to a woman now, not a mystic, whose advice might be practical as well as divine.

"I am a virgin widow," she told her simply.

"My lord departed to his ancestors these four years gone. Now others strive to lead my feet into paths that they refuse to go, because my heart is set on other ways."

The older woman took her hand and drew her to her. "Let the goddess then be your guide," she advised. "I will instruct you."

But before she could, from the streets without came the beating of gongs and the squealing of pipes, the raucous cries of the *yamen* runners and the vicious swinging of their staffs, clearing a way for the Illustrious Presence.

"Way, way for His Illustrious Excellency the mandarin Yet Hing Chow," cried a pompous voice, apprising So Wo Loie's startled ears that the time of her visit was, to say the least, ill chosen.

"Way for the wearer of the peacock's feather," came a cry yet nearer, warning the girl that to attempt escape was foolish.

Even then Li Sing rushed fearfully behind the altar. "Mistress, mistress," she cried, "where can we go? Misfortune is upon us!"

But the priestess stilled any fears that So Wo Loie might have had. "The temple of the Goddess of Mercy is a sanctuary for all who claim her protection," she assured her.

"Then I will throw myself before her," cried So Wo Loie. "Li Sing," and she swung round to the trembling maid, "go home to the Kitchen Gods. When the shadow of the peacock's feather has

passed, I will join you there," and she turned with full confidence to the priestess, in whom she now reposed her trust.

Li Sing slipped out through the porch into the tumult of the Street of the Markets. Shopkeepers were craning eager necks at the doors of the stalls, customers were seeking points of vantage from which to view the August Presence. Urchins and dogs, those lively dodgers of the streets, were evading the swinging whips of the lictors as they cleared a way, and all but imperiled the dignified progress of the mandarin himself as they ducked between the very legs of the sweating chair coolies as they teetered along with the magnificent load. Li Sing needed to have exercised no caution, for none had eyes for her insignificant presence. None would have noted So Wo Loie herself, not even the mandarin, so engrossed was he in creating an impression on the crowd absorbing the triumphant progress he was making.

Across the square, past the fortune-telling booth of Wang Ho, who eyed the tattered equipage askance, not overly impressed with its tawdry magnificence, the procession progressed; into the shadow of the temple it passed, then out again, thus coming under the sign, and for the first time arousing the old man's tardy interest. Up to the *hong* of So Ling Gee the retinue proceeded. The coolies eased their burden down, the umbrella bearer rushed to hoist the insignia over the descend-

ing magistrate. Then as he stepped from his chair the shadow of the dangling peacock feather fell long and straight, like a pointing finger, towards the portal of the temple through which So Wo Loie had so recently slipped.

"Back, back, and give way for my illustrious master," the head lictor cried officiously, while his underlings with whips and bamboo staffs forced clearance way through the throng. "Back to your business and leave the worthy mandarin to his own, which is none of yours."

But Wang Ho, studying the signs again and getting nearer to the key, disagreed with him. As the people fell back and Yet Hing Chow entered the *hong,* the old fortune teller began sprinkling sand upon his board and tracing mystic characters in it. Signs were signs, and it was not for nothing that he was the Eye of the Gods.

Meanwhile, within the *hong* So Ling Gee had fallen upon his face in an abjection that was merely a gesture, and his words of courteous greeting were as sounding brass, loud and melodious, but only the echo of a meaningless action.

"The eyes of all men behold the honor of your visit," he cried. "My mean *hong* is twice glorified by your illustrious condescension."

The mandarin graciously granted him the privilege of rising with a wave of his hand.

"The smile of my patronage is upon you," he informed him. "Under my protection your busi-

ness will flourish, and under my roof the flower of your house will bloom to your glory as well as her own."

The merchant rubbed his hands and smiled. "She is already prepared, O Most Illustrious One," he informed his guest, "and eagerly awaits the time when you shall take her to your breast," and this he really believed himself, for he had resolved upon a system of punishment for the rebel that would make her only too glad to quit his house on any terms and enter the *yamen* with eager steps.

Yet Hing Chow beamed and licked lascivious lips. "The honor shall not long be denied her," he promised.

"The peacock's feather touches my unworthy house with the reflection of its own glory," So Ling Gee agreed.

The mandarin regarded him with benevolent eyes in which there was also a gleam of greed, not only for the prize that he now considered secure. "There are other matters aside from the personal side of our alliance that I trust you are not insensible to," he reminded his host.

So Ling Gee smiled with a keen understanding. "As a merchant I can appreciate them," and he bowed. "My heart and mind are but an open book for you to write your august will upon."

Yet Hing Chow nodded. "It is to our mutual advantage that our relations should be cemented."

"Profits are the magnet that ever draws a mer-

chant's eye," So Ling Gee told him, now meeting those of the mandarin with open boldness, for ceremony had led their steps to the hall of business.

The mandarin smiled broadly. "Then we are well met, August Sir."

"May I humbly request that you do my *hong* the honor of resting in it?" and he waved a hand toward a seat, well pleased with the swift course that events were taking. "The ceremonial tea awaits your testing."

"Most graciously do I accept your invitation," and Yet Hing Chow seated himself, and they were soon in deep and pleasant discussion, disposing of the affairs of others with little thought of the shadow of the goddess creeping over them.

Now when Ho Fah Lee heard the pleasant commotion in the square he deserted the tea house once more in search of diversion, for there is never a Celestial, Outside or Middle Kingdom, that does not welcome a procession, be it of marriage, death or an official passing, so the mariner made his way to the square, but too late to see the full pomp of the official arrival, and with no idea that it affected him in the least degree. His eyes roved about the streets, noting the chattering throngs but now dispersing, and lit upon the lounging lictors and attendants, the stolid umbrella bearer leaning upon his staff before the *hong* door, and the squatting coolies between the poles of the state chair.

Stranger that he was, his one source of information, since the official seemed to have retired into the *hong,* was old Wang Ho, and so he approached his table, where the old gentleman was still frowning through his glasses at the characters he was studying.

"The glory of an official presence lights the square," the mariner remarked.

The fortune teller looked up slowly, studied the young man's face with the same puckered frown that he had bent upon his table and said slowly, "The shadow of the peacock's feather falls upon your day."

This in no way disturbed Ho Fah Lee, for the peacock feather was to him but the insignia of the Emperor's approval, and no concern of his, who had no official standing.

"Have the gods spoken then for luck?" he asked, almost carelessly.

"They demand a silver tongue if they would answer," Wang Ho reminded him.

The mariner laughed at his oversight and threw cash upon the table. Again Wang Ho shook the sticks until one leaped from the bamboo tube and fell across the characters that he had drawn in the sand. The old gentleman bent over it eagerly, then raised his head, and in his eyes was a real regret.

"The sign is evil to your interests," he sighed.

"In what way?" the young man demanded, somewhat nettled at the ill luck that seemed to have

been his ashore in spite of all the good signs that attended his landing, and, furthermore, the smile of love that had warmed him since from bright eyes. "My cargo is accepted and all but unloaded. I am to receive my pay with the last lighter."

Still the old man shook his head and frowned and sighed. "Your sailing day does not appear," he persisted. "The shadow of the peacock feather darkens it."

Ho Fah Lee grew a bit impatient. He had no official dealing ashore and expected none. His business was of a private and commercial nature. His bill of lading was from a far province and in strictest form, and the consignee had approved of the cargo, and even complimented him upon his speed and dispatch; more, even now he was considering the return of another, and with it as a marriage price even a bride. Her widowhood was a personal thing, governed by custom, not by officials, therefore he could see no connection with the peacock feather, and so demanded, "In what manner?"

Wang Ho shrugged at his obvious impatience. "That the gods do not reveal to me," he answered quietly. "I but give you the evil sign that you may not count on their favor."

But more than ever before did the young man wish the favor of the gods and the signs of luck. If this old croaking raven could not give them to him, he must seek elsewhere, and so he turned to the temple.

"Then I will seek my own patroness, the Goddess of Mercy," he cried, but the old man stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"No, no," he told him. "Her attention is already engaged. Her face is hidden from you this day, my son."

Something in the old man's voice made Ho Fah Lee turn back, the sadness of it, and the fact that he had called him son. He sensed in him a friend, and if the signs were evil as he said, what better friend could a man have than one who communed with the gods?

"Why, why?" he asked eagerly, throwing silver this time, and not cash, upon the old man's table. "I would know more."

Wang Ho looked up into the young man's eager face and smiled a bit sadly. He would that he could be the bearer of good news, but the signs were evil, nor were they all yet in. His shrewd deduction had gone so far, but farther it must go. He must know more from human sources before he tried to interpret the divine.

"My son, I have told you all that I can now see," he said gently. "The rest is in the hand of time. Let the scroll unroll as the gods will."

Ho Fah Lee's eyes wandered about the square, noting the lounging lictors and the chair set down before the *hong* door. This was the connection that the old gentleman was trying to make him see, but it was clouded to his inner senses.

"I have naught to do with the mandarin," he told the fortune teller. "My business is with the merchant So Ling Gee."

Wang Ho smiled with the superior wisdom of age and experience. "All mandarins are business men as well," he told him.

Still the mariner saw no connection. "The gods speak in riddles," he complained.

"Then it is for mortals to unravel them," the old man informed him out of the wisdom of his craft, that watched men more than it did the gods of whom he prated.

As if to give him a further clue, at that moment the mandarin and So Ling Gee stepped from the *hong* door. The lounging lictors stiffened into attention. The grunting coolies made ready to take up their magnificent burden. The merchant bent low over his clasped hands, and Ho Fah Lee, not overly impressed with the August Presence, made haste to cross the square. Just within earshot he heard the merchant say, "Then tonight, Most August Sir, I will attend you at your *yamen*."

And the mandarin replied, "The remainder of the bargain money will be waiting for you there."

The mariner did not know what bargain was to be concluded, but made bold by the fortune teller's warning, he forced his own claim forward, not yet realizing that it was one and the same.

"May we conclude our bargain first?" he asked almost impertinently.

The mandarin, aghast at the effrontery of this stranger, whose costume proclaimed him of the Outside Kingdom, stopped, his indignation puffing him up like a toad.

So Ling Gee eyed him coldly. The meeting of these two, if meeting it was, was most ill timed.

"Your cargo is not yet unloaded," he reminded the mariner.

Ho Fah Lee turned and pointed to the junk, her hulk riding high now above the level of the river. "Even now the last lighter is about to leave the deck," he said.

Now Yet Hing Chow was no fool, for all his pompous splendor. He eyed the young man through narrowing lids, noting the eager manner of him, and immediately translated the impertinence of his demeanor.

"Is this, then, the rival to my bidding?" he asked So Ling Gee with ominous calm.

The merchant, caught between two forces, for once fell back upon the truth.

"Even so, Your Excellency," he admitted.

The mandarin turned to Ho Fah Lee with his most impressive and official manner.

"Most august stranger, the worthy mandarin Yet Hing Chow, in whose illustrious presence you now stand, has overbid you for the love blossom that you covet," he informed him.

Suddenly the warning of the fortune teller assumed definite form in the mariner's mind. This

was the shadow, then, that darkened his sailing day, if not his whole life. Here was a formidable rival, one rich and powerful, and with whom he might not cope upon even ground. But first of all, there was honor to be considered, the honor of a passed word, of a commercial bargain, aside from any moral one. He turned to So Ling Gee.

"Then I hold you, sir, to save my face as the first bidder," he told him quietly.

The merchant shrugged his shoulders. "The mandarin has offered more," he answered, as though that closed the matter.

"Is he willing, then, to marry a widow?" the young man demanded.

"He has offered her an honorable place in his inner apartment," So Ling Gee replied evasively.

"There is but one place that he can offer her," cried the mariner. "I am from a far province and may defy the customs that he must hold to. I offer honorable marriage in addition to the wedding money, therefore he cannot outbid me, and it is for you, sir, to uphold your word as a merchant."

"My word was never given," So Ling Gee insisted. "I but said that I would take your offer under consideration. I now find it more to my advantage to accept the proposition of my august friend the illustrious Yet Hing Chow."

Finding that So Ling Gee was willing to repudiate his word as a merchant, Ho Fah Lee appealed to him as a father. "I protest in the memory of your

departed son," he cried. "You would make his widow the plaything of a mandarin's idle hours. In doing this your house would be as much a place of barter as your *hong!*"

"You dare to dishonor my face!" cried So Ling Gee, losing both his poise and his temper.

"You have dishonored it yourself," the mariner told him coldly.

"Worthy stranger," Yet Hing Chow cut in, feeling himself as well as his friend affronted, "I make those of my district respect my presence with a civil tongue."

Ho Fah Lee smiled exasperatingly. "In my wanderings I see many men," he replied, "and judge them by their actions, worthy sir."

"You speak with the jealous tongue of disappointment," and the mandarin had himself in hand once more. "The lotus bud that you have coveted is mine to possess. Her honorable father-in-law controls her filial obedience. It is for her to obey his commands."

"She shall be delivered into your hands immediately," So Ling Gee assured him, thereby putting the matter entirely out of his own.

"By the authority vested in me by the Son of Heaven, I will look to her protection," the mandarin promised.

"It is the trick of a merchant," sneered Ho Fah Lee, "who respects not his word nor his face."

"You have nothing to question me on save the

settlement of your cargo," So Ling Gee weakly defended himself.

"That, honored sir, we will discuss, as you said —later," and there was a veiled threat in the mariner's voice.

"I warn you," cried Yet Hing Chow, swelling himself up with official pomp, "that you are under my jurisdiction, and the sleeve of my favor rests on my worthy friend So Ling Gee. Take care how you come under its shadow."

"I must respect your law while under it," the mariner conceded grudgingly. "I do not look for justice from your administration."

"Take care how you offend!" the mandarin warned.

Ho Fah Lee looked about the square, noting the lounging retinue. "Yes, I see your lictors and your runners," he replied contemptuously. "Yours is the power of might that even defies the law of Heaven."

Yet Hing Chow controlled himself with difficulty. "It is well that my clemency is as boundless as my authority," he said magnanimously.

"Beware how you speak sacrilege in the shadow of the temple of Kwan Yam," cried Ho Fah Lee, "lest she, the All Compassionate One, confound you. She is my patroness; it is to her that I shall go in this extremity."

Suiting the action to the word, he crossed the square, making for the temple steps. Wang Ho,

whose ears could not span the distance, but whose eyes had taken in the gestures and the faces of the disputants, now followed the young man with deep interest. The gods were working out the problem that had puzzled him, the snarling tangle of men's lives twisted in the small hands of a woman.

And at that moment So Wo Loie herself appeared upon the temple porch, conducted by the priestess. Seeing the square filled with the mandarin's train, she shrank back under the protecting gloom of the portal.

"Ai!" cried Ho Fah Lee, catching sight of her, then turning back triumphantly upon the mandarin, "See, even on the instant my prayer is answered!"

"The sign is an answer to me," Yet Hing Chow insisted, then turned and signaled his minions. "Conduct this woman to my *yamen,*" he commanded.

The attendants hurried forward to execute the order. So Wo Loie crouched back against the temple wall, doubting even the sanctuary of the temple itself, but the priestess stepped forward and waved the lictors back with an imperious movement of her hand.

"Stop, in the sacred name of Kwan Yam!" she cried. "This woman claims her sanctuary, and while under it none may touch her."

The lictors fell back, looking inquiringly at their master. By now the passersby, scenting trouble, began collecting in curious groups. Yet Hing Chow's brows drew together. He dared not vio-

late even the temple steps, for his authority was only temporal after all. His was the will of the flesh, and that might now offend the spirits, or, for matter of that, the spirit of those under his immediate authority, and already the crowd was muttering sullenly. He hesitated even while his attendants looked to him for action, but in the face of the priestess and under the shadow of the goddess he dared not act.

Wang Ho, watching silently, let only his eyes twinkle in satisfaction, and even then discreetly veiled them with his lids. When men contended with the gods his amusement was stirred, when they contended with a goddess his contempt. For the moment at least he had no fear for So Wo Loie, nor yet for her lover, for such now the mariner proclaimed himself to be. Tragedy might follow, but the moment at least was comedy, and the discomfort of the pompous mandarin was the steam of *sam shue* to the old fortune teller's nostrils.

But it lit a fire of rage in the bosom of So Ling Gee. This wanton rebel, defying filial authority, taking away his face in public and making a mock not only of his family but of his business—for to the merchant her removal to the *yamen* spelled an extension of trade—raised his temper to the boiling point. Still, beneath the shadow of the goddess his daughter-in-law now stood from under his, nor could he exert a real authority over her unless she stepped out of that protection. He did not dare to drag

her from it, though his fingers itched to do so, but instead he must make an appeal to the one who now shielded her.

"O Most Holy Priestess," he cried. "I demand filial obedience from my daughter-in-law. She is of my house, the widow of my son, and in his name I vest my authority."

But So Wo Loie had recovered from her fright, and her father-in-law's appeal was now her best weapon. Suddenly she remembered the instruction she had received within the temple. After all, her name lord, now in the spirit, was more potent to her than his father was in the flesh, and she might claim the protection of the spirit for the purity of her own flesh.

"It is in the name of my beloved and departed lord that I stand here," she told So Ling Gee. "It is because I would remain in the pure chastity of his memory that I claim the protection of the All Compassionate One. Oh, most respected father-in-law, would you now send me, a love bud, to blossom shamefully in the inner apartment of the mandarin's *yamen?*"

Now to have his family linen hung in the market place for the eyes of the whole village to see threatened the face of So Ling Gee. Yet if he denied the truth before Yet Hing Chow, his purse and standing would be much affected. For once So Wo Loie, claiming a widow's sacred privilege,

had him at a disadvantage and one that admitted of little temporizing.

"The illustrious mandarin would honor you with his protection," he was forced to admit, trying to cloak its real purpose with the softness of his voice and the humility of his statement.

"I would not have my virgin crown of womanhood defiled," So Wo Loie replied defiantly; "I dedicate myself to the brood of the phœnix bird."

"I offer you a softer nest," cooed Yet Hing Chow, fearful now when he saw the coveted prize fluttering from his eager grasp.

"But as I am a widow," she reminded him pertly, "you, in your official position, may not marry me."

The mandarin could not deny this. Yet, for the sake of her beauty more than his own face he condescended. "I offer you the first place in my inner apartment," he replied; though all those who heard him, and they were gathering more and more, knew only too well what that place must be.

"Which I may not accept with honor," So Wo Loie returned, falling back on a thing that she had abandoned mentally, and now took up again as her best weapon.

But her father-in-law refused to be deceived. "This is only because this stranger has bewitched you with his promise," he cried angrily. "You cannot become a nun without the sanction of me, your father, and now I refuse it."

"I have no desire to become a nun," she told him quietly.

So Ling Gee smiled triumphantly. In that event, once that he got her home, he would insure obedience with the bamboo, not only in his hand, but in that of the gentle So Fi.

"Then, Most Holy Priestess," he said with quiet authority, "the right to demand filial obedience is mine. Bid my daughter-in-law to now return to my house."

"I will not return to your house only to be sent to his," and So Wo Loie pointed a scornful finger at Yet Hing Chow. "I will not come back to the beatings of the Mean One of your inner apartment. The sleeve of the Goddess of Mercy is now my protection and I stand in its shadow."

"All this is vain," snarled her father-in-law, "for you shall not go with this Outside Kingdom man to his distant province," and he dismissed Ho Fah Lee with a contemptuous gesture.

So Wo Loie looked tenderly at Ho Fah Lee. The momentous instant had arrived. She might not go to him, but she would go to no other. There was but one way now and she must take it. Once out of the protection of the temple her will might be broken, at least her body would be, if not defiled. That at least she would keep for him as a casket of memory.

"If my feet may not go where my heart wills, then I will join my departed lord," and she turned

quickly and struck the gong hanging in the porch behind her. Its brazen echoes bounded out through the streets, summoning the villagers to a sacred ceremony. So Wo Loie turned back and cast her eyes through the doorway to the effigy of the All Compassionate One. "The goddess, who is a woman," she said softly, "will approve my deed."

"What do you mean?" cried her lover, for from the expression of her face he realized that she had made some terrible decision.

"To remain a wife rather than become a concubine," she cried. "Heaven will judge my act and sanction it."

So Ling Gee, realizing what was coming, took hurried whispered counsel with the mandarin, but the latter only shook his head. He had no power that controlled the action of those under sway of the spirit, and no authority over those who placed themselves under divine protection.

The crowd was gathering thicker, murmuring and muttering, wondering at the summons of the gong. So Ling Gee was desperate. He realized now that he had driven So Wo Loie too far and that she contemplated some act that would take away his face before the whole community that was now rapidly assembling.

"I forbid you," he cried, "and demand that you return to my house!"

His daughter-in-law turned upon with him a smile of triumph, though her voice as she answered was

soft and spiritual, a contrast to her recent demeanor and a concession to the rapidly thickening crowd that the lictors were now vainly striving to keep in order.

"The call of my departed lord is stronger than your voice," she said. "It is to him that I owe obedience. Undefiled he left me, undefiled he would have me join him now," and she turned to the murmuring gathering, sure that her devotion to virtue, a widow's strongest asset, would find approval in their hearts and win a ready sympathy.

"Oh, worthy and compassionate friends," she addressed them, "here at the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy I now make ready to join my departed lord, the Honorable So High Wing."

So Ling Gee plucked the mandarin's sleeve. So this was how she planned to outwit them. If her fate was not left in her own hands, she would seize it by them. Custom gave her the right of supreme sacrifice, an honorable and approved right, sanctioned by custom and sanctified by the goddess. If dishonor was threatened in life, honor she would have in death, and so, publicly proclaiming it as she was, they had no power to stop her. Ho Fah Lee, not yet realizing her purpose, but fearful of it, waited for her next words.

"My marriage feast was never celebrated," she continued, "and my heart has hungered for it ever since. I became a wife and on that very day became a widow. Now that my father-in-law would

make me something else, I fly to the protection of his son, my departed husband. Two suns hence, here before the temple of the Most Compassionate Kwan Yam, I will submit myself to the embrace of the Red Cord. My worthy father-in-law cannot deny you the feast in honor of my bridal bed of death."

There was a malicious triumph in this for her as the crowd murmured its approval and she caught the expression on So Ling Gee's face. Her marriage in the time of famine had been devoid of ceremony, and therefore cheap, but now at least this spiritual reunion would cost him dear, for in honor of it the whole village must be feasted at his expense.

"He will provide also the red robe and the pearl veil of marriage in accordance with custom," she went on, her triumph mounting with the expense, for nowhere could she have hit her father-in-law harder than through his purse.

She then turned her attention to Yet Hing Chow. Much she owed him, and the disappointment that his face showed now that she was slipping through his hands, even though it be into the noose of honorable suicide, must be wrung to the last.

"The most august mandarin Yet Hing Chow," she proceeded, "who honors me with his gracious approval, will see that I perform the ceremony in accordance with the customs prescribed and recognized by his Most Glorious Master, the Son of Heaven," and she bowed, noting that the mandarin

shrank, knowing that in his official capacity he must witness her escape and see her clay, the warmth of which he had coveted, turn cold upon an altar with which she made a mock of him and all his power and all his unappeased desire.

As for Ho Fah Lee, she dared not look at him. He must know that her act was for him as much as for herself. It was an honorable sacrifice and gave to him the keeping of her soul, since her body was not her own to dispose of, only at the hands of death. One glance, however, did she bestow upon Wang Ho, sitting stolidly under his umbrella, unblinking, yet with his eyes full upon her. Then she bowed to the throng once more before she retired to the inner protection of the temple, there to remain under the goddess's protection until she claimed that of the lord she openly honored, for secret motives.

"Therefore, two days hence, at the highest hour of the sun, I invite you all here to witness my departure, feast in my honor and approve my course," and with bowed head she passed into the temple under the protecting arm of the priestess.

红索 THE RED CORD

THE RED CORD

TUMULT raged in the house of So. Chagrin set with a mocking leer upon the *yamen* of Yet Hing Chow. Bitterness lay at the bottom of the tea bowl of Ho Fah Lee, loitering still in the tea house, even though his junk was lightened and rode idly on the river with no prospect of a return cargo, either of merchandise or love. The village buzzed with clattering tongues taking up the tale of So Wo Loie, piecing it out with gossip and conjecture. So Wo Loie, sequestered in the nunnery behind the temple, denied her face to all and gave herself up to presumably Celestial thoughts, preparing her soul for the self-imposed journey into the virtuous land of shades.

But her thoughts were far from Celestial could one but have looked into her heart. Even though the price she paid was her life, her feet, upon the threshold of eternity, stood upon the very apex of terrestrial victory. Denied her right of love, she had chosen the splendid weapon of revenge and with that two-edged sword had laid about among her enemies, even though in the slaughter of their hopes she had felled her own. Momentarily the blow that she had struck at the heart of Ho Fah Lee was forgotten in the exultation that she felt at the discom-

fort she had caused all others who fell under the shadow of her displeasure. Seldom, if ever, she felt, had one small woman, custom bound, enslaved, manacled to a dead past that had never lived, been able by one act to affect so many lives since her own was forfeited.

Eating the unseasoned rice of the nunnery, the piquant sauce of satisfaction poured over it through her ears as she heard the merry-making in the village without, where the feast was spread in her honor by So Ling Gee, to whom every cash was as a silver shoe. Thanks to the position that he held in the community, he had, perforce, to be generous in honor of the occasion, for by her contemplated act the house of So was honored as never before had woman honored her family in the village of Show Hang. Had he been niggardly in the entertainment, his *hong* would have been forever shunned by customers, for woe to the Celestial who does not bow to custom, or despises family honor when it is displayed in a high act of virtue such as So Wo Loie's appeared to be upon the surface.

This, too, would affect his final expenditures when it came to the ceremony itself. Her bridal dress would have to be more gorgeous than it would have been had she worn it to a living wedding, for this departure to the cold nuptial couch of death was more auspicious than a wedding of the flesh. Then, too, her bridal veil of seed pearls must be real, for

she would bequeath them finally to the tablets of memory of her husband, there to be ever after viewed by all as an honor to the house of So. The mockery of them would be a continual reminder to her father-in-law and his Mean One of the final triumph she had achieved over them.

But the triumph was not yet achieved, nor would be until she actually stood under the shadow of the Red Cord itself. To prevent that thing was the immediate task of So Ling Gee, and yet he himself was powerless to do so personally. Many futile wrangles over this he had with his good wife, laying their predicament, manlike, at her feet, since it came of the sex of which she was the authoritative representative.

"This now belongs to the woman's side of the house," he fumed. "You must dissuade her from this last act of folly."

"But for two nights and a day now she has denied herself to me, her loving mother-in-law, the parent of the son for whom she would needlessly sacrifice herself. Ai, ai, ai," So Fi moaned, more in anger than in sorrow. "What ill payment for all the years of my tender care of her!" and she wailed inarticulately.

"Cease your idle whining," her husband cried, "and save it to melt the heart of this unfilial wench. Cursed was the day I took her to my house. Even now she has cost me five ingots of silver for the

feast the village is stuffing itself with. May their bellies writhe and reject their gluttony," he grumbled.

"But if she relents you will make it up from the bargain money of Yet Hing Chow," So Fi strove to pacify him, "once she retires to his *yamen*."

"Should he not possess her, his favor will turn to enmity, his disappointment will be visited on me, and he will resort to squeeze until I am as dry as a rice paddy in the eighth moon. You must see her, she must see you, she must be dissuaded before I am compelled to plunge myself deeper in financial disaster by the purchase of the wedding robe. Women are, indeed, the curse of the gods, and the one whom we have taken into our house has now brought down on us the curse of the goddess. You must ask an audience of our rebellious daughter-in-law and lure her once more to our protection, and out of that of the misnamed Compassionate One. If not, the wrath that you have known of me will be as nothing to that which you will learn," and her distracted lord took his way back to the *hong* whose peace was so disturbed by the shadow of the goddess's sleeve.

Now the task that he had set So Fi was most disturbing to her. Ever since she had heard of So Wo Loie's flight to the goddess's protection and her determination to take away their faces to the glory of her own, even at the sacrifice of life itself, she had made every effort to see her unworthy daughter-

in-law, but without avail. Having openly avowed herself to sacrifice, So Wo Loie claimed the privilege of seclusion for meditation and preparation, though So Fi strongly suspected that this was merely an excuse to avoid her, for Li Sing had been in her company, if not in her confidence. The little maid, torn between grief, fear and a tremendous admiration for the courage of the rebel, was not a fruitful source of information for her mistress, nor did So Fi dare force her to make any disclosures. For once the cantankerous old dame found herself obliged to exercise tact instead of authority, and she had little practice in the more delicate art.

But the time for sacrifice was fast approaching. If anything could be done to persuade So Wo Loie to return to the parental roof, So Fi was sure that means could be found to make her quit it for the shelter of the *yamen,* to the mutual good of all. This sudden madness for a stranger, a river pirate and all but an outside barbarian, was the heritage of her low blood, the stock from which sing-song girls came. Her disregard for the conventions had been manifested before the arrival of this stranger and would eventually work out its wantonness in the official *yamen,* if they could but get her there. The stranger must leave—her husband would see to that; but So Wo Loie must remain. And So Ling Gee had charged So Fi with the task of persuasion, so the old dame put a curb upon her immediate anger, pulled a sorrowful face and took counsel

with Li Sing, the one mediator whom she could trust.

"Li Sing," she cooed, though the modulation more resembled a croak to other ears, "we must to the temple and the ear of So Wo Loie. It is your duty, not only to me but to her, to make her see me in her own behalf. Come, come, the master is even more distressed than I and will visit his displeasure on us both if we are not successful. The duties of our household lie now outside of it," and she dragged the unwilling Li Sing to what the latter knew would be a fruitless parley.

"By the sorrow this misguided piety has brought upon our home, may you learn the beauties of obedience from those in tender authority," So Fi told her as they teetered out along the street toward the temple.

"Oh, yes, Illustrious Lamp of Filial Knowledge," the maid replied with dutiful lips but doubtful heart.

"And see to it, when from my authority you go to another's under the red awning of betrothal, that you make your ear the echoing shell of elder counsel."

"Oh, yes, Soft Voice of Exceeding Wisdom," Li Sing agreed, wishing only too fervently that that day were fast approaching.

Along the streets they teetered, So Fi with bent head and scornful mien, as became one whose daughter had honored greatly with a supreme reverence an only son. But this honor was an empty one

to the old dame, who would have been rid of the detested So Wo Loie upon better, if not more honorable, terms. However, she took the homage paid her with what grace she might, hoping on this visit to exchange it for the more negotiable coin of profit when she could persuade her erstwhile charge to forego the cold couch of nuptial memory for the warmer *kong* of the mandarin's favor. As for the Famosan, So Ling Gee would deal with him as a merchant and a parent, once So Fi could lure her daughter-in-law back to the house where the goddess's authority did not extend.

Arriving at the temple, she entered, grudgingly buying a red taper and lighting it before the shrine, then, having paid mock devotion, struck the gong by the side of the altar and summoned the priestess, bidding Li Sing stand behind her meanwhile.

The guardian of the shrine appeared, level-eyed and calm-browed. "Who calls the custodian of the Compassionate One?" she asked, though recognizing So Fi by the presence of Li Sing.

"I, a distracted mother-in-law," wailed So Fi, making a strong bid for sympathy, "whose misguided daughter contemplates leaving me alone and disconsolate by departing to join her lord, my son, without regard to my bereft household."

"You refer to my charge, So Wo Loie?" the priestess asked quietly.

"Even so. Is it too late for her to turn back from her pious but mistaken resolve?" and there

was an eagerness in So Fi's voice calculated to impress her hearer with the necessity of her daughter's staying with her to shed the sunlight of her presence upon the old lady's now clouded twilight.

"Until she actually stands under the Red Cord there is always time for her to draw back," the priestess informed her.

A fiery gleam of hope burnt up the false moisture of So Fi's falsely dimmed eyes. "Then I pray you crave her to do so for the sake of a distracted mother-in-law."

Now the guardian of the shrine knew the heart of So Fi as it had manifested itself to So Wo Loie. When that supplicant opened her own heart to her, the treatment of her mother-in-law was not the least of that confession. Had the power of persuasion been hers to urge, it is doubtful if she would have exerted it in behalf of such a plea, so she answered somewhat coldly: "I serve the Goddess Kwan Yam, offering your daughter-in-law the sleeve of her protection. It is not for me to persuade her to step from under that gracious shadow. Decision lies in her own mind, and it is for you, not me, to make her change it. I will summon her," and she disappeared behind the altar.

Now So Fi had good cause to fear the effect of her own unsupported supplication with So Wo Loie, so she turned to the passive but nevertheless somewhat worried Li Sing. "Now join your voice to mine persuasively," she commanded. "Tell her the

lotus fades beside the goldfish pool, lacking the dew of her presence. Tell her that our house is a dark lamp without the oil of her society."

"Oh, yes, disconsolate one walking in the shadow of loneliness," the little maid agreed, but without any particular enthusiasm.

"Do you but echo my words," So Fi insisted, "for somehow she was always closer to you, a slave, than to me, whose heart she should have considered above her own, had she not been the coolie baggage that she is."

But before she had more time to comment upon her daughter-in-law's shortcomings, So Wo Loie rounded the altar and stood before her. Her pose was that of a meekness never before displayed before her august mother-in-law. All ornaments, even the band that had held the blossoms against her hair, had been laid aside as trappings of the world that she was about to leave. Her eyes, usually so bold, were downcast, and her face, always so animated, was a mask of calm, a calm almost ethereal, for the temple had laid a quiet hand upon her, and sorrow had taken the place of the exultation that her short-lived triumph had given her. Even Li Sing, who had seen her but yesterday, felt a change and shuddered for it, realizing the futility now of any pleading on the part of So Fi.

It was So Wo Loie who broke the silence that hung before her and those who had come with their

persuasions, a silence that was like a gauze curtain. "Why am I summoned from the threshold of my lord's bed-chamber?" she asked in a voice whose quiet seemed to match her face.

At the sound of it So Fi recovered herself and found her tongue. "I," she cried in a tone of mock affliction, "his lonely and bereft mother, who cannot suffer you to depart and leave me doubly disconsolate."

Her daughter-in-law shook her head sorrowfully. "I but follow your own teachings of filial duty and marital devotion," she replied in gentle chiding. "Since I am unworthily desired by men, I repent of my past actions and would go to my lord, your son, undefiled."

"No, no, you are too young," cried So Fi. "You should stay and gladden our declining years with your youth."

"My youth is a blossom about which the bee of lust buzzes," So Wo Loie reminded her. "It is my duty to take it, pure and undefiled, to him who may wear it with honor, even in the Halls of Darkness."

"Is there no way I can move you to return to the parental garden and there gladden our lonely hours with your perfume?" and So Fi put all the pathos she could muster into her unaccustomed voice.

"It would be of no use, O loving mother-in-law," So Wo Loie replied with equal pathos. "Well I know your love for me, through many years I have

had ample proof of it, but even to comfort your heart, who love me so, I may not return. Yet Hing Chow would not suffer me to remain in virgin seclusion, even with you and all your guardianship. It is for the honor of the house of So, your honor even more than mine, for you are my lord's mother, that the All Compassionate One bids me return to you only on the tablets of memory beside his name."

So Fi looked at her with startled eyes. Could she possibly be in earnest? She had not been at first, of that she was convinced, but these priestesses worked strange things on those who came under their sway. At least the argument seemed vain so far. Perhaps So Wo Loie was playing her own game of deceit, for never before had piety, even before the family joss, been one of her few virtues. Yet before she had always been defiant, even under punishment, and now, when the weapon lay in her hands, she did appear to be using it maliciously, as So Fi would have applied the bamboo had their positions been reversed.

Taking cue from her daughter-in-law's demeanor, So Fi dissolved in false tears and appealed to Li Sing in a choking voice. "Speak to her, Li Sing," she sobbed, "persuade her with the tale of my loneliness."

Li Sing came slowly forward and held out her hands in speechless supplication. She would have had So Wo Loie return on almost any terms, yet did

not dare to voice that wish, even though the Mean One's appeal was in truth a command.

So Wo Loie smiled at her and took the outstretched hands in her own, holding them tightly. "Companion of my widowhood," she said softly, "be now my maid for the toilet of my bridal."

Li Sing's fingers closed over her's convulsively "Oh, worthy mistress," she cried fearfully, "let me attend you for a return to those who need you more than the happy shade."

"Yes, yes," So Fi added chokingly.

"Without you our house is but an empty phœnix nest," and the little maid's arms went round So Wo Loie in a fearful and trembling embrace.

"Whose mother bird sings plaintively," So Fi added, looking at the picture the two made.

The earnestness of their embrace convinced her that if any one had weight to call the rebel back it was Li Sing, her more than slave, her playmate, her confidante, her friend, and So Fi covered her face with her sleeve and with shaking shoulders left the temple hurriedly, a picture of stricken grief.

So Wo Loie, her arms still about Li Sing, looked over the maid's shoulder with lighting eyes and a lip that curled in quick contempt. "Rather like a croaking raven whetting her beak to tear me once she had me again in her claws," she said when So Fi had gone through the temple porch and out once more into the square beyond.

Li Sing raised her head hopefully. "But surely

you do not need to enter the door of death to escape. With the arts of cajolery that you possess, the mandarin would be most kind."

So Wo Loie held the maid off from her and smiled into her troubled eyes. She who had counseled her against the wantonness of her ogling of Yet Hing Chow, now for her sake, forgetful of former virtuous admonishings, was trying to lead her back to a life of shame, any life, in fact, so that it was life. She shook her head in kindly denial.

"With the knowledge of my true lover's continued desire for me, the embrace of another would be as the tortures of the Seventh Hell," she told her. "No, no, Li Sing, the Red Cord shall at least tie me to a perfect memory."

The maid's lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "Then you mean me to be your bridal maid of death?" she asked tremulously.

"Yes, but more than that, my friend, my confidante, my messenger. Go into the town," she commanded, "and seek the mariner, Ho Fah Lee. Tell him that I take my love of him through the door of shadows."

"No, no, return with me to life," Li Sing pleaded.

"There is no life without his love. Go tell him that, or else my ghost will stand forever at your bed reproaching you."

"Yes, yes, I will go," the maid promised, fearfully.

"Tell him that since love is denied us I will give

him life. That even beyond I will await him as now, a virgin, not a widow, for in truth I will be no man's but his. Now be off, and do not return without some message from him."

Li Sing looked at the exaltation in her face, the sparkling glory of her eyes, the smile upon her lips. It was as if her body was of fine silk through which shone the flaming taper of her soul. What a fine thing this love must be, what a brave thing that defied all else, even death, with its bright presence, that took beyond the grave something to frighten off the very devils of that awful darkness. And yet, even as she looked upon it in the face of her mistress, it frightened the little maid, frightened with its very power. Yes, she would find the author of it, though even him she feared almost to face.

"I go, I go," she cried, "ai, ai, ai," and she left, wailing through the temple upon her quest.

So Wo Loie turned her face to the placid one of the All Compassionate above her. His patroness she had been and now was hers. Into her keeping if not into his arms she had gone, and since the latter could not be, she was content, or as content as she might be when the hot blood of youth, not yet cooled by love, must live on memory or forget in a last sleep. At least she would accept no shameful substitute, and from that the goddess had at least saved her. Perhaps she might save them both yet, if she but prayed and held fast to her purpose, and

he prayed too and offered a sacrifice, which she was sure he would.

So Ling Gee had trusted little in the power of his wife's persuasion. He had bowed, or at least pretended to bow, to custom, had feasted the village since he could do naught else, had denied himself to the mariner, the author of all the tumult in his house—yes, and author first of all of this whole trouble, for it was back there on the river four years before that this began. Vainly he cursed the God of Luck that had made him halt that day the Rain God went out upon the plain when he had rested in the shadow of Wo Fat's hut and took his drouth weed to graft upon the sickly limb of his own house, hoping she might strengthen it, or at least sow a seed that now should have been in flower.

Looking back to the dry promise, he wished that Ho Fah Lee might have taken the girl then with his two *piculs* of rice before the merchant's eye had fallen on him. The memory of his son's death would be less bitter than it was now, for with this weed blossoming to barren flower in his house her perfume had been poison in the nostrils of men. The mariner he did not fear. To him he had denied his bargain, would pay him the cargo price his bill of lading demanded and let him go back empty hold and empty hearted for all he cared, nor risk his face with him; for, after all, the fellow was an

Outside Kingdom man and he owed him a grudge from his first bidding for the girl in the time of drouth. That she had defied her very family now and fled to a protection that he might not drag her from angered the merchant the more each time he thought of it. Yet Hing Chow would come again, demanding back the bargain money and with it withdrawing his promised favor. That would swell the bill of hate that was piling up with other material expenses gainst him.

So Fi he knew in advance would fail. But this was a family affair now, and not one family alone. He looked over his account books to a debt that he had canceled four years before, but now, by this unfilial act, was alive again. A messenger had been dispatched to summon the debtor in case all else was to fail, and in advance So Ling Gee prepared for that, so when his wife entered the *hong* after her interview with So Wo Loie, the pessimistic view of what had and had not been accomplished toward a settlement merely fed his rage. When she announced that she had seen the rebel only to play an idle game of words with her, So Ling Gee turned upon her and laid the blame all on her shoulders.

"It is all your fault," he stormed. "Had you but kept your temper in check in the inner apartment you might now coax her with a sweet tongue!"

"Sugar for flies, but she was ever a wasp," So Fi retorted shrewishly, glad that now she could open her mouth and use her tongue as the natural flail

that it was. "Oh, that I had her once more within the walls of our house, then she would lift her voice in song while I played the bamboo as a fitting accompaniment, the big-footed coolie," and So Fi raged on until her lord stopped her.

"If we get her there she must be handed over unbruised to Yet Hing Chow," he reminded her. "I have sent for her father," he continued; "perhaps he may show her the path of filial duty if we cannot. It will go ill with him if he fails to make her obey, for I still hold him in my debt."

"Shame upon you," cried his wife, smarting once more that her own authority was being overridden, "that you must apply to him and so lose face with a coolie."

"Cease, woman, and be off with you," retorted her harassed lord. "You have borne me a sickly son and failed to correct the conduct of his widow. My house is cursed with women."

"You are my son's father," she reminded him. "It was you who brought his wife to us."

But So Ling Gee's patience was at an end. "Back to the inner apartment," he commanded sternly, "before I forget my dignity and correct you here!"

So Fi departed muttering, not that she had any fear of the threat, but because she desired to return to her own domain and there await the arrival of Li Sing and find out if that gentle emissary had had any effect upon the unruly one. If it were not for the matter of gain, So Fi would have been glad to

see her daughter-in-law under the Red Cord, departing from the house with an honor she had never bestowed upon it. But to leave with this junk captain, to take her body to the service of another, to rear a coolie brood of brats when she had given no descendant to the house of So—never. The fact that this fault lay in her own son and not in this adopted daughter did not enter into So Fi's thoughts. She must have some object for her disappointed hate, and So Wo Loie's strength had made her able to bear it, even from a physical standpoint. Let her return to them, and from there go to the *yamen,* or So Fi would spend the rest of her devotional life burning devil charms to pursue her daughter-in-law into the land of shades, relying on her own son to there complete the punishment that she could not upon this earth.

But So Ling Gee's thoughts were more of the immediate present and its effect upon himself. To have the mandarin's favor slip through his fingers, strangled by the Red Cord in the hands of a defiant woman, was unthinkable. Since threats, persuasions and pleas from those of his own household had failed, he must needs turn to the very origin of the trouble, the filial duty that So Wo Loie owed to her own in the person of her father, and so he awaited the arrival of that worthy with impatience. With the debt that held over from the time of famine he could bend him to his will, for to his daughter the merchant had looked for payment, and since

she had not done that by a present of offspring, her service as the slave of the Mean One was the body debt to be paid. If now she defied the authority vested in her present family, the debt fell back upon Wo Fat, and it was for him to lure her from under the shadow of the Red Cord and thence to the mandarin's protection, so that So Ling Gee might profit from the association.

When the shadow of Wo Fat darkened the door of the *hong,* So Ling Gee looked up with a great inner relief, though his face was a calm mask that hid the seething anger within him. The farmer looked sleek and well fed. His field had prospered under the Rain God's tears for three years now, and even the memory of the pinch of famine had faded from him. His wife was well and strong, his son a husky toddler, and though no other had as yet been given him by favor of the gods, he looked ahead with peace since his one man-child gave such sturdy promise. Therefore, with no thought of the debt that lay between them, considering that canceled in the person of his daughter, he had no idea why the merchant had summoned him, unless to inquire if there was a surplus of his field for sale, possibly to provision the junk that he had noticed at anchor off the *hong.*

He clasped his hands before him, made a low obeisance, then asked quietly, "You sent for me, most honorable sir?"

"Yes," So Ling Gee replied in a voice quite as

quiet, but with a deep significance. "Your Drouth Flower has turned a poisonous weed in my house. Lacking filial obedience, she has refused to enter the *yamen* of Yet Hing Chow, in spite of a most excellent offer made by him to me."

Wo Fat listened indifferently. The fact that the merchant spoke of his daughter, or she who had been his daughter, and not of trade did not interest him. The girl was off his hands, a bit of his crop was on his hands, and he was more interested in it than in her.

Therefore he answered, "She is of your house now, august sir; it is for you to bend her to your will, even as I did to mine that made it yours."

So Ling Gee made a gesture of impatience. "She has left my house and taken refuge in the temple of the Goddess of Mercy, vowing to join her departed lord with the Red Cord. Yet even now will I forgive her if you persuade her to return to my inner apartment."

"Why should I ask her to return?" asked Wo Fat, still not interested. "She is of your house, not mine."

"You sent her to me with unfilial thoughts," cried So Ling Gee. "You did not bring her up as a dutiful daughter. The fault was yours first, and now that it has rebounded to the discredit of my house, you must correct it. Her mind is full of that Outside Kingdom man who was for buying her in the year of the great drouth."

Still the farmer refused to be impressed. "I took her from him and gave her to you for your son," he reminded the merchant. "It is for you to control her mind, not me," and he made it evident by the impatient shuffling of his feet that he was eager to be back to his field and saw no profit in idly discussing a matter that he had long since dismissed, with his daughter's presence, from his mind.

So Ling Gee smiled unpleasantly. "Must I remind you of an obligation of your own that she must discharge, and if not she, then you yourself?" he asked quietly.

"I know of no obligation that is not discharged, worthy sir," Wo Fat replied, a bit uneasily.

"First I filled the mouth of you and your wife, the mother of your son, with rice out of my bounty. Next I discharged your debt in payment for the girl, nor have I ever again regarded that obligation, even though she was too late to add anything to my house but another mouth. But now, when she has departed from that house in violation of my authority; when she has defied me and set at naught my wishes; when she has claimed the protection of the goddess and, because she might not go as a wanton to the rice bidder that you at first set up against me, refuses the offer of honorable protection from the mandarin himself, to take my face away and exalt her own, she is for joining her departed lord, thereby defying the filial authority of his own father, who

should have been hers too if you had reared her in the proper atmosphere."

"Still, honorable sir, I do not see my part in all this," Wo Fat protested.

"Then I shall make it plain," So Ling Gee told him grimly. "In defying me she has revived instead of paying the debt that is between us. Therefore, I will have payment of that debt, if not through her, then through your son. Make her return to my house or your boy enters my *hong* as his father's debt slave. I shall apply to the mandarin at once," and he made as if to go from the *hong* to the *yamen* on the instant.

The farmer immediately came out of his lethargy. If his daughter had left the house of the merchant by an act of her own and refused to return, then, indeed, might his son be seized as a debt hostage, for as such did So Wo Loie depart from his home, even though it was under the guise of marriage. But no presents had been passed, no feast had been eaten, no red chair had borne her to the house, all being waived for the debt cancellation and in conformity with the famine. If she had defied the filial authority under which she had been placed, then must Wo Fat reassume his own and make her take up the burden he had laid upon her, or the merchant would have the right to shift it to his son, the bud that he had nourished at the sacrifice of the Drouth Flower.

"No, no, illustrious sir," he cried in sudden terror.

"I will talk to this unnatural daughter of mine. Her will shall be as yours when I gave her to you. You must not think of taking my son, my only son, from me."

"It is your son or her," the merchant warned him. "This you must make her see and touch her heart to filial pride and sacrifice. And mind you, keep the oily tongue of persuasion. She is under the protection of Kwan Yam and none may lay hands upon her."

"She must listen to me," wailed Wo Fat. "She must listen to me for the sake of my son, my son, the one bud of the house of Wo, my son, my only son!"

So Ling Gee smiled at his grief and terror. Here perhaps was the real tether to drag So Wo Loie from under the protecting shadow.

"Her ears are stopped with the wax of stubbornness," he warned.

"I will melt them with my words," and Wo Fat staggered through the door of the *hong* and out across the square toward the temple.

"The gods give them virtuous heat," the merchant flung after him as he leaned against his *hong* entrance and watched the other's progress toward the shrine.

Once within the temple, Wo Fat struck the gong with trembling hand and begged an audience with his daughter. Again she stood before him after four years, for in all that time they had not met.

The object, if not the direct purpose, of this meeting was obvious to So Wo Loie and she steeled her heart against any plea that her father might be here to offer.

"Who calls me from my pious devotions?" she asked quietly, her eyes looking straight ahead as though she had not recognized him in the soft gloom before the shrine.

"I, your father," he replied.

So Wo Loie shook her head slowly. "I am no longer of your house," she reminded him. "You gave me to the house of So that I now honor by joining its son, my lord."

"No, no," he cried passionately, "you must not go!"

"Why do you plead for me to stay," she asked bitterly, "me whom you cast out in the year of the drouth?"

"Those to whom I gave you desire you to remain," he told her.

"And to what purpose? Only that I may bring them gain at the price of shame."

"You must remain for the sake of *my* house," and there was the old parental authority in Wo Fat's voice.

"And why?" she demanded coldly.

"I am deeply indebted to So Ling Gee," Wo Fat hastened to explain. "If you depart from his house and go not where he desires you, then must my son

enter his *hong* as a slave, to clear his father's obligations."

So Wo Loie threw back her head and laughed bitterly.

"Again your son," she cried. "To put rice into his mouth you sold me, made me a widow but not a wife, against my will. You blackened your face denying a bargain with one who is still faithful to the memory of my beauty. Now you would barter my honor for your son." She turned her face so that the light of the tapers burning on the shrine behind her struck full upon it. Wo Fat saw that it was cold, hard and determined. "No, let him safeguard his sister's virtue," she told him. "To my slavery he owes his life, now let him work out the debt in the same service."

Her father saw that all pleading would be vain with her. He remembered only too well her sturdy independence and the strength that had carried her through her hard life in his house, yes, and even made her outlive the famine to his profit. But now she was out of his authority and bent not her head even to his plea of filial devotion. His fingers itched to drag her out of the temple, to beat her into submission she should have given without question, but before the calm visage of the All Compassionate One he was powerless.

"The curse of my joss on your unfilial head," he cried angrily. "I wipe you from my ancestral

tablets. Your name shall be forgotten and your face blackened——"

His daughter stopped him with a gesture toward the goddess as the custodian of the shrine, hearing the peace not only of her charge but of her very sanctuary disturbed, hurried in from behind the altar.

"No," So Wo Loie cried, "I shall be honored by a memorial arch. The old Buddha herself will approve my sacrifice and confer her favor upon my memory. Even you, my father, shall not influence me now. Already I am as one dead."

"You are as one never born of my house," Wo Fat growled, lowering his voice, however, out of respect to the priestess, and fearing that she might mark him with an evil sign.

"Then I am beyond the reach of you and your authority," So Wo Loie reminded him.

But just then the voice of an outside authority was heard in the noise of the mandarin's train coming across the square. Wo Fat retreated to the porch of the temple, and his daughter, drawn by more than idle curiosity, followed him to the door, looking out upon the tumult of the street. So Ling Gee hurried across the square to the temple steps when he saw Wo Fat emerging with anything but a confident manner.

"Well, well," he cried, "did she listen to reason?"

Wo Fat made an impatient gesture and shook his head. So Ling Gee looked up to the temple porch

and saw So Wo Loie standing in the doorway, a smile of triumph upon her lips, and behind her the guardian figure of the priestess. The noise of Yet Hing Chow's approach was growing louder and the usual curious crowd was beginning to collect. Well the merchant knew that the Illustrious Presence would be in anything but an exalted mood with him unless he could assure him that some steps had been taken to abandon the ceremony that would leave many problems unsettled between them.

"The mandarin comes," he cried, appealing himself to So Wo Loie, in spite of the fact that in so doing he was risking his own face. "Reconsider before it is too late."

His daughter-in-law did not answer, but gazed at him steadily under level brows. So Ling Gee's usually calm face, one of his best attributes in trade and diplomacy, knotted into angry lines. Wo Fat, marking the fury that contorted it, realized how its wrath would fall upon his house unless his daughter relented.

"Consider my son," he begged, "the son of our house."

So Wo Loie slowly shook her head, turning it toward the entrance of the Street of the Markets, from which the mandarin's train was even then emerging.

"I can consider only my duty to my husband," she told them quietly.

With a rattle and clatter the retinue of Yet Hing

Chow emerged from the narrow street into the wider spread of the square. The mandarin himself, recognizing So Ling Gee beside the temple steps, made a sign for his coolies to set him down and descended from his chair. Looking up to the door of the temple, a wide smile spread over the moon roundness of his face as he saw So Wo Loie standing there; then he turned to the merchant and asked softly, "Has she listened to the voice of wisdom?"

But the question was not low enough to escape her alert ears, and the maid came to the edge of the porch without, however, setting her foot upon the step. So far was sanctuary, farther and she might be under temporal authority, but with the priestess behind her and the gathering crowd upholding her with custom she could be bold.

"I have listened to many voices, O Illustrious Sir," she told him, answering the question with her own lips, "but the one whose promptings I must follow is the voice of my own heart."

"And does that not speak for me?" purred Yet Hing Chow with his best attempt at discarding official dignity and assuming the softer pose of a lover.

"It speaks only *to* you, August Sir," she told him with dignified mischief. "As the upholder of the will of Heaven you must approve of my sacrifice. As your eyes have honored my insignificant beauty, so must your heart honor my course of action. Were I your most august wife, an honor which now I may never aspire to, and you were gathered to your

ancestors, I could pay you no higher compliment than I now pay my departed lord. But I am not your wife, nor ever could be, therefore for your sake and my own do I depart that I may remove my presence from your desire and leave you the memory of my virtue. The time draws near. As you have looked on me with kindly eyes, see that those who witness my departure do so with reverent respect. As a magistrate I charge you with this last office for me."

With this mocking instruction So Wo Loie bowed with becoming dignity, not only to him, but to the gathering crowd, and, attended by the priestess, returned once more to the inner sanctuary of the temple. The mandarin scowled at the curious collecting populace, all of whom, having feasted in her honor, and awaiting only the final honorable ceremony, were in hearty accord with the widow who was ready to make herself a heroine. If she continued discussing her motive so freely, it must of a necessity become a matter of common knowledge and commoner gossip, and thus affect the face, if not the position, of the official in his new district. That she should take away his face together with his heart was unthinkable, and yet that appeared highly probable in the light of her recent defiance.

But this was no place to discuss it in the presence of so many wide open eyes and ears, and so he took a dignified way to the *hong* of So Ling Gee, followed sullenly by that worthy, and fearfully by the per-

turbed Wo Fat, for now, indeed, was he in the very presence of the law. If he left it to the merchant, having acknowledged that he had the mandarin's ear, he might make full use of it, did not the farmer intrude his presence and state his side of the case before called to do so under the sign of the unicorn.

But once inside, and out of other earshot, it was to So Ling Gee that the mandarin turned sharply.

"Is this district I have come to rule one where daughters are so ill reared that they may defy all authority?" he demanded sternly.

"She is not my daughter, Honorable Worship," the merchant denied vehemently, "only my daughter-in-law. Her unworthy sire, this disreputable coolie," and he introduced the shrinking Wo Fat to the mandarin's notice, "shall answer to me for the unfilial upbringing that even my worthy guardianship has not been able to overcome."

Wo Fat flung himself at Yet Hing Chow's feet, kowtowing hurriedly, and then raised his face and voice in vigorous protest.

"Oh, Ambassador of the Son of Heaven," he cried, "I call my joss to witness that she left my house as obedient as the buffalo that plows my paddy. It is the influence of the house in which she has since been reared that has corrupted her."

At this So Ling Gee's face was convulsed with rage. To be insulted by this vile scum of the fields, this follower of the buffalo, this trampler in dung who thus spoke what he thought to be his mind

against a man who was his benefactor, the feeder of his belly, the rearer of his son and the honorable relation of his own daughter, who even now reflected the family traits of her low-born father, was unthinkable. "Vile debtor and reviler of my bounty," he raged, "do you dare to attempt to blacken my face in my very presence, to say naught of the Most August One whose benevolence must turn to contempt before the lies that issue from your lips, violating the purity of the air he breathes?"

Wo Fat scrambled to his feet, bowed over his clasped hands to the mandarin, then turned defiantly to his reviler.

"I but save my own honor from defilement in the Most August Presence of our worthy official," he contended.

But So Ling Gee was not to be set aside in his robed dignity as a merchant.

"Oh, worthy sir," he appealed, unconsciously associating Yet Hing Chow with himself in their choice of the disputed matter, "will you let this coolie scum insult me before you?"

"I am a landholder and a taxpayer," Wo Fat defended, not thinking that this was the time to point out the fact that he was also a father and as such the author of the present difficulty.

"You are a mortgaged debtor," So Ling Gee retaliated, "and I claim your unworthy son to work out your credit."

But in this mass of charge and counter-charge the

worthy mandarin could see nothing definite coming before his judicial judgment. Rather it was a personal matter to him, a matter of heart and face, of desire inflamed and then denied.

"Peace," he cried, making a commanding gesture that silenced both. "Through your lack of feminine authority each one of you is under the ban of my disfavor. Your unfilial and disobedient daughter-in-law has made you both distasteful in my eyes," and he glared ferociously at So Ling Gee. Then, having reduced that worthy to dignified, if somewhat abashed, silence, he swung round to the farmer. "The noise of your excuses is less pleasant in my ears than would be your cries under the bamboo," and at this Wo Fat held his breath, fearing that otherwise it might be tested under punishment. "As surely as So Wo Loie mounts the platform of sacrifice," the official continued, "so surely will I visit my displeasure upon you both. You, So Ling Gee, shall receive no benefit from the trade that I control by virtue of my office, and besides, the matter of your past taxation shall be looked into. You, Wo Fat, shall bring tribute from your fields to offset the disobedience of the daughter you have raised to make a mock of both houses that have been cursed with her presence."

Now in this last remark So Ling Gee saw a possible way to end the unpleasant discussion and a dismissal of the very subject thereof.

"Then it may be just as well, O August Sir," he

purred in oily tones, "that her blight has not been suffered to touch your worthy *yamen.*"

"I am as able to rule my household as I am the district," the mandarin informed him coldly. "A woman has never failed yet to bow to my will."

It was not in the diplomacy of the merchant to point out that one already had, and in spite of all outside influence seemed persistent in so doing, even into the halls of darkness.

"Let us dismiss this unworthy hussy," he counseled, clapping his hands and summoning one of the *hong* servants. "Let us wash away any unpleasantness that she may have created between us in a cup of tea. Let not one woman vex the peace of three men."

"Yet it has been done," the mandarin was forced to admit, more to himself, however, than to the two whose first authority had been set at naught.

Now while useless and fruitless argument raged within the *hong,* Wang Ho, putting the signs of gods and men together, began, by mystical and natural deductions, to solve the problem that proved unsolvable to others. Nothing that went on about the streets, and still less what went on about the temple, escaped his quiet eyes. He had partaken, with the rest of the village, of the feast that So Ling Gee had been compelled to spread. It was the only bounty he had ever received from the merchant's hands, for that worthy relied more upon his own

joss than the gods who controlled the wider destinies of men. As for the mandarin, the worthy seer knew that he, in common with his kind, set his own terrestrial judgment up above the deities to whom mere men, but not officials, bowed. Yet had the goddess there, the Serene One, through her devotee, disturbed the serenity of parental authority, family adoption and official desire.

Wang Ho had observed the arrival of Wo Fat and was aware now of the futility of ancestral interference with virtuous design. Only desire was the real thief of virtue, the prize that women hold and never really relinquish except by their own volition, for all other service is but of the body and not of the soul, a temporal yielding that wins only a temporal gesture. Had not even the goddess herself denied her person to a husband, though had he been a lover, Wang Ho doubted not that the Serene One had been more a woman and less a deity. Even so would her adopted daughter, crouching now under the shadow of her sleeve, have foresworn the cold embrace of honor for the hot, if doubtful, one of earthly arms, so that in them lay what she thought the goal of bliss.

The old fortune teller smiled as he recast the signs of her, now falling so fast from so many men's hands. Here and there they lay, crossing and recrossing each other like tangled threads upon a loom where the idle fingers of mischief twisted the pattern of life into a snarl of death. It taxed his

skill to see aught in them but a skein thrown away after the hopeless mauling. Only one thing might come clear out of this and that would be the Red Cord that would tie virtue to death, uncut by the shears of dishonor. The old man sighed, smiled, reached for his pipe; then as he puffed it dreamed of a far distant youth that love had snarled as well for him, and longed that he might pull two threads from out of this woof and with them weave a more pleasant pattern. It was a vision of the fatherhood denied him, and because of that very denial, more broad and kindly than it might have been in realization.

Even as he nodded and dozed, Li Sing had sought the tea house and the presence of Ho Fah Lee.

"O worshipful stranger," and she bowed before him, "I am the bearer of a message from my mistress, So Wo Loie."

The mariner immediately rose from his sombre musings and followed the little maid outside.

"All messages from her are cold unless riding to my ears on the music of her own voice," he told her. "I pray you come with me and bid her give to my own ear what is only for my ear alone."

But Li Sing was fearful. "Oh, good sir," she cried, "she may not step without the temple, and even if she could you would bring her naught but danger."

He smiled and shook his head. "The protection

she claims is that of my own patroness. Even do I and my crew lie as the fish in her basket, and under her sign brave wind and storm. Now since another storm has overwhelmed your mistress and myself, it is to my own goddess that she has flown, and even there, in her holy house, I may speak with her. Go, tell her so, and I will follow if you are fearful of the gossip of the street," and with that he loitered behind and let Li Sing speed on with fearful feet to tell So Wo Loie that her lover was as bold even as she, and as defiant of the laws of modesty and custom.

Yet for those very traits did Li Sing admire him and see in them the reason for So Wo Loie's courage. If one so strong and brave as he had cast an eye on her, the little maid would have been but too glad to be a pirate's loot, if need be, rather than the slave she was of mind and body, yes, and even soul. But it was only given to her to serve the love of other and braver lovers. When her time came for life's fulfilment she must yield herself to the will of others, finding only in dreams, not deeds, the glory of a love that she might serve only as a handmaid.

Into the temple she slipped, casting fearful eyes at the official clustering in the square, where the lolling lictors, the squatting coolies, the arrogant runners and the curious, loitering crowd proclaimed that the Official Presence still lingered in the *hong,* discussing, no doubt, the rebel, who waited for the cause of her disobedience with a defiance that stirred

the very air about her with the murmurous breath of turmoil.

Ho Fah Lee proceeded to the tryst more leisurely. He too noted the evidence of Yet Hing Chow's presence. He stopped to fling cash upon old Wang Ho's table, but did not stop to ask for lucky answers to an unspoken wish. Rather, crossing to the temple porch, he pulled prayer papers from his sleeve, lit them and threw their ashes into the bowl of other devotees beside the door. Within he bought a red taper and set it before the calm-featured one, kowtowing first to her before he made his presence known to her charge.

Then rising, he did not strike the gong, but called softly, "So Wo Loie!"

Even though his voice was low and almost cautious, the ears of love are sharp, being attuned like the lyric charms hung in the trees to catch the slightest movement of the wind to set them tinkling musically. So the heart of So Wo Loie caught the soft vibrations of his voice in her ear and answered the summons herself, coming into the temple from the little garden space behind. The low arch of the inner shrine framed her, an almost ethereal picture, one almost of the immortals already, or so she seemed to his eyes as he beheld her. His impulse was to spring forward and take her in his arms, but the sacred presence in which they both stood forbade such profanation and laid a holy hand upon desire.

A moment they stood dumbly looking at each other, but with eyes vocal and eloquent. She it was who broke the silence, but in her voice there was something of the sanctity of her gaze, a new and inner thing, a spiritual quality that he had never known she possessed. It frightened him, for his memories of her, brief as they were, had been so strong, so full of life, life that had mocked the Hunger God with sturdy strength and later defied the authorities of law and custom, even with a bravery that had brought her to a martyrdom that even now touched her with a holy light shining from within.

"I speak to you here at the door of the Land of Shadows," she said—not in sadness, but with a sublime courage as though, with the thought of him, those shadows would be luminous to her. "Let the memory of me be always with you. I will attend your family tablet as though my name were already there in your far house across the sea. I make your joss my own as though I had dwelt beside it with you. I do not go to join the lord who never had me, but to wait for you, undefiled by any other man. Write lover's verses on the prayers you burn for me that my waiting may be comforted."

But the sudden realization of actual loss that her words brought woke the man in the mystic lover before her.

"No, no," he cried passionately, "I will not let you go!"

She smiled, sadly, gently, but with one hand held him back with a gesture that restrained, even though in it was all the softness of a subtle caress.

"There is no other way, lord of my inmost soul," she told him. "Since I may not come to you, the Red Cord will be to me your embrace, holding me always."

At her words the barrenness of this promise stirred him. Who was he to take her life for such an empty thing? What right had he, since that life might not be his, to deprive her of it? Memory he knew would be his always, but that her body, so fair, so young, so sturdy, should before its time melt into dust, turn ashes from a flame that had not really touched her, was too much to ask or even accept. Something of the Outside Kingdom knowledge he had gained in his wide travels suddenly taught him a sacrifice as holy as her own.

He bowed his head in submission to a fate he saw they could not change, bowed even as she, and perhaps more so, for he was a man, alive to his desires, and suddenly renouncing the most desired object.

"Rather would I give you to another so that the bloom of your beauty would still gladden the earth," he said.

Her face lit with the sudden glory of a smile. She realized now that for her he was offering even more than she for him, for he was a man with all a man's hot impulses and who would suffer the tor-

ments of the Seventh Hell picturing her in another's embrace.

"I am the flower of your household," she replied gently, "or the barren bud whose petals may not open in any sunshine save that of your august smile."

"No, no," he protested, "let me depart again that you may live as you would have had I not returned."

"That may not be," and she shook her head in gentle protest. "Knowing that you love me, I may only live now in that knowledge. Your love is the lantern that lights my feet down the pathway of darkness."

"No, no! For my sake you must not go," he pleaded.

"There is no way that I may stay with you. The hour of sacrifice approaches. When they raise an arch to my memory, it will be you who raises me to honor, and if love for us may not be, then honor at least must."

"Honor is an empty thing with which to try and fill an aching heart," he protested.

"Life is an aching pain to an empty heart," and she pressed both hands to her own, now swelling within her bosom with the very wrench of it. "Mine now, filled with the thought of you, I may take to comfort me." Her voice broke. He stepped forward, but she waved him back, unable to bear that he should even touch her hand.

"Farewell," she choked, then turned suddenly and

fled to the inner sanctuary where he might not follow her.

Ho Fah Lee stared at the empty frame her departure left. So would his life be, he suddenly realized, if she really departed from it, an empty frame that never again could hold the image of love. Yet better that his life be empty than hers forfeited. At least with her upon this earth he could tread it as a garden where the perfume of her memory still remained and not a barren desert that memory watered fruitlessly with his tears.

He turned to the All Compassionate One, the deity to whom she had fled to escape, his deity to whom she had given her soul in dedication to him and under whose protecting shadow she now stood ready to give her life. But he now saw it was needless. So much he had taken that he could take no more. He knelt before Kwan Yam, bowing his face to the floor and praying silently. Let her who had taught him compassion now teach So Wo Loie that to depart this earth was simply to darken it for him who waited for her. With what was now between them no one else could have aught but a grudging service of the body, which he would yield out of his larger knowledge.

When Ho Fah Lee arose from his devotions and stepped once more into the square, he observed Wang Ho regarding him with shrewd eyes from behind the shelter of his round glasses. Some-

thing in the old man's gaze drew the mariner to him.

"O worthy sir," and the young man bent his head before him, "the evil signs you read were all too true. I acknowledge you as the Eye of the Gods. May you not also be now their ear for me and find out from them how I may avert the calamity that hovers over the person of one more dear to me than my very life itself?"

"I have studied the signs most carefully, O courteous stranger," the old man replied, "but their meaning is hidden and clouded by too many conflicting forces that war with your goddess there," and he pointed to the temple from which Ho Fah Lee had just emerged. "Your sign lies under hers, and that is kind, so kind, indeed, that it now shelters your desire. Is it not so?" he demanded.

"Even so," the young man agreed, "and for that reason I would know the purpose of the All Compassionate One, for under her protecting shadow I now see naught but other shadows that darken my future."

"Do you not remember that in denying love, Kwan Yam herself took death for her bridegroom and thereby gained immortality?" the seer asked him. "Surely you, who carry her image in your heart, must know her history. So if one of her sisters, for love's sake, renounces life, she too may become immortal, honored of men and envied of women whose courage was no match for hers."

"What do I care for immortality for her now,

when youth quickens her blood and the tea-rose blossoms in her cheeks? Rather would I give her life, even though I renounce her love to another. Even so have I found the fair-haired barbarians do with this love of theirs, and in such sacrifice find even more exaltation than in a realization of their fleshly desires."

Wang Ho nodded his head slowly. "Even so," he agreed. "I who have seen much of men, and communed more with the gods, have seen this virtue in them, a virtue most commendable in the eyes of Heaven, as are all good deeds. It is easy enough to grasp our desires, but to let them go for the good of others when we most desire to hold them is the highest form of virtue. Even the Great Pattern and Teacher of All Ages spoke no more Celestial wisdom, and one who torments the flesh for the sake of the spirit wins for himself and others a lantern of wisdom to guide his soul through the paths of darkness, both here and hereafter."

"What do I care for my soul, or even hers now?" Ho Fah Lee cried. "It is herself that must be saved. Can you find no way, O worthy sir? I will give you silver, not cash," and he drew a purse of coastal dollars from his jacket, but Wang Ho only shook his head a bit sadly. "If this is not enough," the mariner insisted, "I have a silver shoe aboard the junk there. Even that is yours if you but find a way."

"When one takes unto himself honor in the face

of all people, one may not withdraw and still keep face," he reminded him.

"What do I care for face, except her face of beauty," the young man raved. "But that I would have remain to gladden the world, even though it may not gladden me."

"There is but one way," Wang Ho said slowly, seeing his real distress.

"What?" asked Ho Fah Lee eagerly.

The old man cast his eye across the square to the retinue of Yet Hing Chow loiteringly awaiting the pleasure of their master.

"Authority is vested in our elders," he told the young man, "and filial obedience may save the face of a woman even in the face of a holy vow. Not only that authority but her present family alliance and the majesty of the most high law vested in the representative of the Son of Heaven are there," and he pointed to the *hong*. "So far I know their persuasions have amounted to naught when set against her honorable will, nor for all their temporal authority have they been able to shake her pious resolve. That lies in her heart, and a woman's heart governs her will always, while the counsel of elders appeals only to the head. If through her heart their arguments may reach her ears, it may be that she will turn from her resolution to explore the halls of death and set her feet once more upon the paths of life, even though that

road be more beset by shadows to her than the darker way."

Ho Fah Lee digested this slowly. The worthy seer was telling him now of men and not of gods. His voice was the wisdom of the flesh and not the mysticism of the spirit. By the actions of men and not of gods had So Wo Loie's feet been driven even to the steps of the altar of sacrifice, and for the sake of the heart that he himself held was she prepared for the final step. Already he had compromised with his own desire for her; now it seemed the fortune teller was advising him to compromise with others for the same end.

The matter of his cargo had not been settled. His pay still lay in the chests of So Ling Gee, the pay that he had offered as a wedding price for the merchant's daughter-in-law. Even the higher bid of a return cargo had not been discussed since So Wo Loie had upset all bargaining by taking her person to the protection of the goddess. If she had done this for his sake, he would take his departure under guarantee that, if she stepped back into the life that she renounced, her path would be made smooth after he had left. He was willing to leave her behind in other hands so that those hands were kind.

"I will see what I can do," he said, then turned and made his way across the square and into the *hong*.

Within he found the merchant, the mandarin and the coolie deep in discussion, so deep, in fact, that his entrance was not noticed by them.

"Your talk is but the clatter of empty heads," Yet Hing Chow was saying irritably. "Your parental pleas have not persuaded her, and she dies the death of spite to take away your faces."

"Is it rather not we, Most August Sir, who drove her to it?" Ho Fah Lee interrupted.

The mandarin looked up, scowling as he recognized the intruder. "Rather, sir, it was you," he told him ungraciously.

"No, let us be honest and divide the responsibility," the mariner replied quietly. "We cannot both possess her. You hold the power of force, but her heart has chosen me. You will not permit that she shall go anywhere but to your *yamen,* therefore she takes the only door of escape. As it now stands, neither of us may have her; therefore let us both relinquish her to her widowhood and not drive her to the cold bed of her departed lord."

Yet Hing Chow eyed him suspiciously. "This is some trick of yours," he objected.

The young man shook his head. "If I have your most august word, upon the dust of your ancestors, that So Wo Loie may return to her father-in-law's house and there remain an honorable widow, I shall depart and leave her there, if you will."

"Let her return to her own father, then," So Ling Gee cried, refusing to accept a responsibility that

would bring him under the mandarin's disfavor. "I will not have her in the house that she has disgraced by her disobedience," and he turned with a contemptuous gesture to the harassed farmer.

"I have too many mouths to feed now," that worthy objected, seeing not only the merchant's but the mandarin's enmity directed toward him if he sheltered the rebel now. "She is no longer of my house, nor will I have her back."

Yet Hing Chow turned triumphantly to the compromiser. "You see," he smiled, "there is no place for her to go but to me."

Ho Fah Lee looked from So Ling Gee to Wo Fat. There was no yielding in their sullen faces, and he realized how the mandarin dominated them. If So Wo Loie was to leave the protection of the goddess it must be to go under his.

"Then you will make her an honorable part of your household?" he asked earnestly.

Yet Hing Chow drew himself up with excessive dignity. "She should be honored by any place that I am pleased to give her," he replied.

"You will be kind to her?" the young man persisted.

"The treatment she deserves she will receive at my hands," Yet Hing Chow answered non-committally.

But this was not enough for one delivering his choicest treasure to the keeping of another. "Now if she will come to you, do you promise to forgive

the rash step that she had contemplated?" he demanded.

The mandarin, seeing the light of her presence already illuminating the inner apartment of the *yamen,* that had been shadowed by the prospect of her absence from it, became magnanimous. "I will even take up the feast that So Ling Gee has provided and make it a repast in the honor of her coming," he promised.

"At whose expense?" the merchant asked eagerly.

"Yours, worthy sir," Yet Hing Chow returned positively, "and a cheap price to win back my favor," he reminded him.

"But the bargain money?" asked So Ling Gee, thinking of the sack still reposing uncertainly in his strong box.

"That we will discuss later," the official rejoined, smiling shrewdly.

Wo Fat took sudden courage from the change affairs seemed to be taking. "And my son's servitude?" he cut in.

Yet Hing Chow turned to him benignly. "He will remain with you. Your credit is extended. Is it not so?" and he swung round to the merchant for confirmation.

"As Your Excellency commands," So Ling Gee admitted grudgingly.

In these two concessions Ho Fah Lee saw at least a basis of negotiations. "Then for her own sake I

will try to persuade her," he told them, "then sail down the river, leaving her life and the promise of good treatment in your hands, Most Excellent Sir," and he bowed deeply to Yet Hing Chow. "May she be persuaded to change her course."

"I do not doubt she will," the mandarin announced as the mariner stepped out into the square.

But decision still lay on the knees of the goddess, for So Wo Loie denied herself even to him, being occupied with her devotions and the thoughts of their last interview, and so Ho Fah Lee had to return and tell them that their decision must await the morrow and the confirmation of it that lay not in their hands but hers.

When Wang Ho opened his umbrella to the next day's sun he saw that the conference of men had been upset by the determination of woman, for the coolies were busy before the temple setting up the scaffold for the sacrifice. The stall owners and shopkeepers were bustling busily against the appointed hour, realizing that So Wo Loie would make a holiday for the village, and that they had best get the day's business over early so as to devote themselves to festivity. Hucksters of fruit and sweetmeats were sorting their wares and wrangling over vantage stands from which to control the expected crowds. Urchins and dogs, the village idlers, were standing about, interfering with the workmen, open mouthed

and open eyed, obstructing construction, and dodging kicks, blows and words as had ever been their custom in every time and land.

The old fortune teller, foreseeing a busy day, laid out his paraphernalia, and then devoted his present idle time to speculation of the coming event and the casting of signs propitious or adverse to the occasion. Sundry and conflicting they were, involving as they did numerous people, for seldom, if ever, had he seen one woman tangle into such a helpless snarl the destinies of so many others besides herself. One by one he conned the signs, love and hate, those twins of trouble; trade and authority, parental bickering, intrigue, honor and dishonor, the saving and the taking of face, the conflict of the spirit and the flesh. The peacock feather shadowed the sign of luck, the sign of luck contorted the sign of trade over the *hong;* the Son of Heaven, through his representative, presided unwillingly over custom, denying it in his heart, and grimacing josses jostled each other in various households, only to be mocked by the serene sleeve of the quiet goddess whose feminine mark was the symbol of trouble. And in all the chaos of tangled *fung shui* the sign of a propitious day was lost, gleaming and flickering to the old man's peering gaze as a bright star riding through a tempestuous sky, where writhing clouds, wind driven on the breath of wrath, obscured, revealed, concealed and then revealed it again at every point of the zenith but a set one.

Even before So Ling Gee arrived at his *hong,* Li Sing, as the bridal maid of death, was abroad for the wedding finery for which the merchant was bound to pay as father of the one principal in the ceremony. When Wang Ho noted this he saw that indeed So Wo Loie had prepared to strike her hour, and that without consulting him as to the auspiciousness of the day of her own appointment. On this he frowned and began casting the signs for her—no easy matter when they were dependent on so many sources.

So Ling Gee himself appeared and, noting the preparations before the temple, at once sent his clerk to the *yamen* to inform Yet Hing Chow that, to all appearances, matters were proceeding without any halt so far as the principal was concerned. Impatiently then he awaited the arrival of the mariner, who had that night slept aboard his junk. Since the head of his inner apartment had failed at this late date, the only one on whom he could count to lift a voice of persuasion was Ho Fah Lee, and though he hated to be beholden to one whom he had scorned and repudiated in bargaining, still must he put his tongue within his cheek for the sake of his face.

As for So Fi, a messenger was dispatched for her, for, as head of the feminine side of the house, she must be present in case the ceremony really advanced to culmination, a thing he still hoped the mariner might avert. At any rate, one must be pre-

pared for almost anything in view of the fact that the altar of sacrifice had been already raised.

An ominous calm enveloped the temple itself. Li Sing had slipped back into it with the wedding dress and the bridal veil, the bill of which would be sent to So Ling Gee now in any event. Within, the maid attended her mistress, nor could she speak for the tears that choked her voice as for the last time she ministered to her mistress's toilet. Nor had So Wo Loie any desire for converse during her preparations, letting her thoughts, as became a bride, dwell upon the future, even though that was shrouded in the mystery of the beyond. A wedding of the spirit, this was, one in which she hoped to strip the flesh of its torture of denied desire, for she could not lend her body now to any other service than the highest. Passion's flame, feeding upon baser material, had burnt up all the dross in her, leaving only an ideal that death now must counterfeit for her.

The attendant nuns slipped here and there about their quarters and into the temple itself, preparing the altar for the most supreme sacrifice that it had ever known. In honor of this day they had collected myriads of tapers from the goddess's devotees and they now stood before the shrine ready to burst into adoring flames, lit by the spirit hand of her whose soul would forever be a part of the shrine she had honored with a brief presence in exchange for an eternal quiet.

But no peace dwelt without; rather, turmoil born of the peace that So Wo Loie sought at the expense of others. Wo Fat, rising before dawn, had hurried in for the last conference, fearing for the freedom of his son should not his daughter turn at the last moment from her mad purpose. She had, indeed, proved the curse of the gods, and her first sacrifice now seemed but a malicious trick of fate turned by the reappearance of her first lover. Weed of the drouth she had been, and one that grew to greater strength in an alien house only to poison the air of the one that she had left.

Thus Ho Fah Lee, riding in from his floating home in a sampan, found his arrival eagerly awaited by the two parents whose authority he had set at naught by appealing to the fancy of a rebel maid. Scarcely had he put foot on the jetty than they stood before him—the man who had passed his flower over to another after a bargain had been struck; the other who had made a later bargain only to repudiate it for the coin of shame. Even in his loss did the young man feel a sense of gratitude to the fate that had taken their face from them to the honor of his own. Though his loss might be greater than theirs in So Wo Loie's departure, yet the honor that they won in it was a mockery that shed a spiritual glory over his own life and sanctified a love that they had denied him.

"The blessings of a lucky day upon you," he greeted them with ironic courtesy.

"The signs of such a day are not propitious," So Ling Gee replied bitterly, pointing to the busy workmen completing their grisly task before the temple.

"Then she has not relented," he cried, with a sudden chill gripping his heart.

"To the contrary," her father-in-law told him. "She has sequestered herself from the whole outer world, save only her maid, and upon her lips she has laid the seal of silence. Yours must be the last persuasion."

"And to what purpose?" the young man demanded, feeling much the same spirit of sacrifice and resentment that had stirred his loved one's breast.

"The one that you avowed yesterday," So Ling Gee reminded him. "Her life is forfeited to us all, yet you were willing to ask her to forego this final thing, even at your own expense of feeling."

Ho Fah Lee nodded, for the raised poles from which the Red Cord was to hang held a mental picture that he could not face.

"I will make one last attempt to dissuade her, if she will hear me," he said.

"Then make haste," cried So Ling Gee, for in the distance was heard the mandarin's approach, and he feared the effect of his clamorous pomp upon the ears within that might not take it kindly.

But the temple was denied to Ho Fah Lee. The priestess bade him remain upon the porch and she would take his message in to So Wo Loie, as it was

in her power only now to grant or deny an audience. The young man waited impatiently upon the steps, turning his back upon the now finished scaffold from which the workmen had descended. Behind him the retinue of Yet Hing Chow spread out into the square, gathering a crowd that they pushed back at the same time. The mandarin, looking from his chair, frowned at the now completed altar out of doors and descended at the door of the *hong,* only to cross within earshot when he learned from the merchant that their emissary was appealing for a last word.

He made an impatient sign to the lictors to force the gathering throng back out of hearing, and stepped into the cleared space before the temple steps, So Ling Gee and Wo Fat sullenly standing behind him. Then in the temple door appeared So Wo Loie, her slender figure clad in the flowing folds of the red bridal dress, her face almost hidden by the pendent strings of the wedding veil.

"Who summons me at the very hour of my departure?" she asked, as though the veil obscured her vision, yet knowing well that she would have obeyed no call except that of her heart.

"I, Ho Fah Lee," her lover told her, bowing his head, as much in grief as in reverence, for the mockery of her wedding apparel brought into sharper contrast the scaffold at his back. "I beg you to remain and live, even under the protection of the worthy mandarin Yet Hing Chow. I relin-

quish any claim that I may have upon you to him, and he has promised that you shall have the most honored place in his inner apartment."

The dangling seed pearls all but caught the angry glitter of her eyes as she shot a glance at the mandarin waiting in dignified silence while another spoke for him.

"*You* relinquish me to *him?*" she asked in bitter scorn.

"In the end it will be for your own happiness," Ho Fah Lee contended.

"But I am ready for the sacrifice," she protested.

"Then let the sacrifice be mine instead of yours," he begged.

Beneath her masking veil she surveyed the others, the sullen features of her father-in-law masking his seething anger, the cowering fright of her father seeing not her but his son in her return, the sleek and oily official covering with false dignity his unworthy desires. Then she turned back to Ho Fah Lee, looked deep into his troubled eyes, his eager lips hanging upon her reply, willing to give her up to life on any terms so that she only lived.

"You have all agreed on this?" she asked, and he nodded. Then she turned to So Ling Gee. "You, my father-in-law?"

"It seems best," he replied, as though the matter had been given worthy weight by him.

"You, my father?"

"It saves my son," Wo Fat tremulously piped.

Had her mind not been already set, this would have turned it: to be sacrificed once more for the flower of the house, to be made a weed, a pleasant weed, and yet not worthy of any garden but that of shame because of an outraged sex. The lips that showed beneath the dangling pearls curled scornfully.

"And so, for the pleasure of men, I must forego my hope of heaven? *No!*" she cried, and turning behind her, struck the loud gong upon the temple porch, vehemently and repeatedly.

"My hour is struck. Who are you all who would dispose of my pious resolve? My life is in my husband's keeping; I go to place it there," and she flashed a triumphant smile at the discomfited Yet Hing Chow. "Better the cold embrace that he will grant me than the despised one of dishonor. Men may not move me from the will of the goddess."

Behind her on the porch the nuns crowded out of the temple door. Li Sing, trembling but faithful, crept to her side. The waiting villagers, apprised by the signal, began crowding in from the side streets, putting a tax upon the *yamen* runners to keep them in check. Wang Ho, by virtue of the respect for his powers, edged his way through and gained a place of vantage close to the temple steps.

So Wo Loie's eyes swept the gathering multitude behind her veil. This was her hour of triumph, and, even at the price, for the moment it seemed

worth it to her. She gave her hand to the priestess who had been her protector, and with her aid stepped upon the sacrificial platform.

"People of Show Hang," she cried, opening her arms and including them all in her introduction of the ceremony, "I call upon you to witness my sacrifice to virtue. A virgin widow, I desire to join my departed lord and lie beside him in his narrow bed. As I drank the wedding wine, so now again, that my marriage may be consummated in Heaven, do I drink once more," and she accepted the cup the priestess held up to her, draining it eagerly.

"Give me a child to hold against my breast," she said softly, reaching out her arms.

A woman eagerly held up her infant. So Wo Loie took it and cradled it softly against her bosom, then her eyes sought those of Ho Fah Lee, and her next words he knew were addressed to him.

"May the child that I never had be symbolized in this and be born of a dream in the Land of Shades."

She took a jade necklace from about her head and dropped it over the child's as she handed it back to the honored mother. Then she straightened up and fixed her eyes upon Yet Hing Chow.

"May my virtue be remembered more worthily than it has been here, and may it come to the notice of the Son of Heaven through his worthy official," she charged, turning to seek the face of Wo Fat.

"May my family, the clan of Wo, recognize the honor that I confer upon it, thereby acknowledging my early training," she reminded him.

Then she turned upon the scowling So Ling Gee. Beside him So Fi had just crept up and now stood glaring at her daughter-in-law. Them she favored with a smile, and in her voice was all the years she had bowed beneath the burden of their guardianship.

"May the house of So, to which I was carried, rejoice in the honor that I do it in my departure," she said in mock reverence, and swung back to the crowd. "Do ye all, O worthy friends, of whom I now take leave, give honor to the high principle that takes me from you. May I be a worthy example to your wives and daughters. Ai, Li Sing!" and she made a gesture to the waiting maid.

The girl stepped upon the platform and placed a low stool under the bamboo cross-beam. The priestess then mounted the platform, holding in her hands the red silk cord in which the noose had been already tied. So Wo Loie took it, then clasped it to her breast in both hands. Her fingers trembled as they held it, her whole hand clenched about it, then she raised her eyes to heaven, viewing its blue expanse through the soft shade of the pearls that fell about her face.

"Now to the embrace of this emblem of domestic felicity do I submit myself," she said, handing it to

Li Sing, who mounted the stool and made the cord fast to the beam above so that the noose hung down in readiness.

"Bear witness, O my friends," So Wo Loie cried, "how I have guarded my virtue. By this final act may I win your applause, and pass into the Land of Shades worthy of the lord who waits me there."

There was an audible intaking of breaths as she bowed to them, then mounted the stool and tested the cord. Smilingly she reached her hand down to Li Sing, who passed her a red silk handkerchief so that the contortions of her face might not mar the solemnity of the occasion.

With it held ready in her hand So Wo Loie addressed her final word to them. "My friends, farewell," and with that she placed her head within the noose, adjusted the handkerchief about her face and reached back one foot to kick the stool from under her.

Just then a murmur ran through the watching crowd. "See, see, the cord," one cried, and then another.

"There is a knot . . . look——"

The voice of Wang Ho rang out above them all. "Stop, stop!" he cried. "A sign, an evil sign!"

Ho Fah Lee, observing it, leaped to the platform and with a swift movement swept the beloved head out of the noose and lowered So Wo Loie to the platform, snatching the concealing handkerchief from her face.

"See, see," he cried, pointing to the cord, "there is a knot, the noose will not slip."

She smiled up at him as he mounted the stool.

"Arrange it for me," she told him.

"No, no," commanded the fortune teller. "It is an evil sign. The gods have spoken their disfavor. They were not consulted as to the date. It is not a lucky day for the deed."

The crowd murmured and stirred, for the voice of the gods had their respect. Even in their disappointment of the delayed spectacle they could not but approve. Ho Fah Lee untied the Red Cord from the beam and handed it to So Wo Loie. She looked down at it, fingered the knot below the noose, then turned regretfully to the multitude.

"My friends, bear with me," she begged. "I will await the lucky day, yet think of me as one already dead until it comes. I return to the shadow of the goddess's sleeve till the gods have spoken," and she left the platform, giving her hand to the priestess, who led her in while the crowd dispersed, more anxious far than she that Wang Ho should find the day that she had missed in her pious resolve.

觀音慈悲手
THE SLEEVE OF THE GODDESS OF MERCY

THE SLEEVE OF THE GODDESS OF MERCY

OLD Wang Ho had little cause to complain to the God of Trade, no matter how the other gods hid their faces from him after So Wo Loie's failure to choose a lucky day for her departure for the Land of Shades. Her delay, upon the very threshold of that misty country, operated at least to the wily old fortune teller's profit. The careless knot that had prevented the noose from performing its fearful office had in reality untied many cash strings for him, not only of those most concerned but among the whole village, for having been given an object lesson upon the dangers of attempting a momentous step without ascertaining whether or no the time was propitious, all those who had carelessly put off consulting the will of the gods now hastened to make use of Wang Ho's oracular telescope for peering into the mysteries of the future.

Villagers contemplating architectural improvements on buildings already up—though there were admittedly few landholders who had thought of erecting dwellings, outhouses or even pigstys—no longer held off from consulting him upon the *fung shui* necessarily attendant upon such activities. Shopkeepers adding to their stock made haste to

find the lucky day to buy. Several whose departed relatives still awaited the selection of a final resting place grew restless now that the warm weather made it apparent that the departed desired interment, raked together what cash they might, extended their credit to provide the feast and ceremony, and besieged Wang Ho with requests to find a site and time favorable for the last sad rites, having an object lesson in So Wo Loie's futile efforts to make herself as lively a corpse as she had been a vivid personality.

As for those most concerned with her departure, or the possible fact that she might remain, each day that passed brought them to Wang Ho, who viewed and reviewed them behind the masking screen of his round glasses, looking even more deeply into their hearts and motives than into the signs and symbols he read for them. Ho Fah Lee, delaying his departure to conform with his love; So Ling Gee peering, or striving to peer, with greedy eyes into the future that the shadow of death lying over his house alternately lightened or darkened, yet begrudging the cash with which he strove to unlock the door of mystery, and haggling over its spending with all a merchant's loathing to pass over into other hands the profits of his trade; Yet Hing Chow, majestically pompous, vainly striving to make his official position overawe the gods, or at least their servant, and succeeding but indifferently, for old Wang Ho had but little use for mandarins, many

of whom he had met in his wide travels and seldom to his own profit, so that now, having one who must curry favor with him, he gave it but grudgingly and with no rebate as a concession to the August One whose peacock feather had in the first instance cast a baneful shadow from which a maid had fled to Wang Ho's patron saint.

All these reacted to the profit of the old necromancer, but what their problem stirred in him none might know, for outwardly the mask of his full moon placidly covered his emotions, if emotions he had, as successfully as the gods appeared to cover their will from the eyes of men. He deciphered this difficulty and that, he advised burial days, he measured *fung shui* by the sun, the wind and the running water, he appraised building sites and gave advice to architectural improvements with a clear, straight vision, but for the problem that had raised so many, for the interrupted ceremony the knotted cord had stopped to knot so many other problems with the same string, he seemed to see little, to offer no advice for the cash that was passed to him, contending that the gods had hid their will; that as he was not at first consulted, they had shown their displeasure for that omission by withholding now the lucky day, and until that was found for the main actor in the tragedy (for tragedy it was to all whom it affected, bound by the personal effect of it), he could give no real advice and offer no real solution. He was the eye, the ear of the gods only, and until

they spoke to him, or appeared to his vision, he was as deaf and blind as any mortal among them.

Thus several days passed, in which Wang Ho deserted his place under his tattered umbrella, being much abroad upon the business of his craft while it enjoyed such profitable activity. Then the villagers again adjusted themselves to the dog-trot of the commonplace as soon as they had settled their own affairs with the gods, and cared but little for those of others, even the one who had pointed out their own laxity in these matters with such sudden and dramatic purpose.

Only the women now seemed to take a new interest in Kwan Yam and frequented her temple more than had been their wont for some time. Perhaps the triumph of their sister—for So Wo Loie's stand had indeed been a triumph, and would continue as such until she again stood under the Red Cord for the last time—made them see anew the power and virtue of the goddess whose protecting sleeve now stretched over what they were beginning to recognize as a rebel, and they no doubt, one and all, desired her assistance against masculine oppression, even though it might not be to such a serious end. For there is little privacy among the Chinese, and any one's business is every one's business, so that the real motive behind So Wo Loie's desire to depart to a husband to whom she had been joined not by the ties of flesh and association but merely by the irking bonds of custom had been pieced out with

threads of gossip until the whole village was well aware of the real state of affairs and her heart.

To be sure, affairs of the heart are not supposed to be in the control of their owners, according to celestial usage, and that a woman, and particularly a widow, had taken them into her own hands placed all participants in the full light of the lantern of understanding. This was particularly obnoxious to So Ling Gee, not only as a father-in-law but as a none too well regarded merchant who had levied as much commercial "squeeze" upon the luckless villagers as had the mandarins before Yet Hing Chow, even as he too would do in his turn. They had not forgotten the price of rice he had held in the time of famine, nor the mortgages he had collected with a toll of hunger, therefore his predicament was much to their liking, also the prospect of a second feast at his grudging expense.

As for Yet Hing Chow, the village had suffered with and from mandarins before, and the sight of his discomfort would ease the burden of his rule when it settled heavily upon them. That lust had led him into an indiscretion and now held him in discomfort would without doubt protect the morals of some of their daughters, now that he had been burned at a forbidden flame. The whole episode booted ill for his reign among them, for he had lost face before he had time to perform one official act. Therefore, when he sat under the unicorn to dispense the questionable justice of his office, they had some-

thing with which to make later complaint against him should he wax too officious, and laid it up against him for future use. When So Wo Loie finally departed from among them they would ask the Son of Heaven for a *pai-lau* to her memory, and with that as a lasting honor they could bring about Yet Hing Chow's dishonor, since he had thus desired her and driven her to this step.

All this was whispered in the inner apartments and openly voiced in the tea houses, even the one frequented by Ho Fah Lee, much to his discomfort, though as a stranger he dared make no defense of himself or the object of his devotion. Besides, it was in his hands really that her honor lay now, and he must regard it more sacredly than his own, for it had been given to him in trust, since she might not yield herself.

Had it not been for old Wang Ho, he must have departed not only to keep his face but hers, for there would have been no real excuse for his delay, except a personal one, now that his business had been concluded. It was in the matter of the return cargo that the old fortune teller had befriended him, for after the ceremony So Ling Gee would have seen to it, with the mandarin's assistance, that he was done with him and hounded him out of the district, but by the signs of luck attendant upon that sailing, and also by the signs of the second ceremony, Wang Ho had shown the merchant when he consulted him that ill luck would be upon his venture

if the goods he was sending out of the district were not consigned to the same carrier that brought them in. Wang Ho had shown him how the mariner had come in under the sign of the Tiger and brought the sign of luck with him. Now if he departed cargo-less, the luck that he had brought would be his cargo home and not left ashore with the goods he had delivered. Therefore, though So Ling Gee blamed Ho Fah Lee for much that had happened, he saw the wisdom of the old man's reading, and though he read nothing else for good, the *hong* keeper decided that he would court no ill luck by flouting him, especially since his daughter-in-law had brought so much in her neglect of a lucky day.

Besides, he could not deny, even to himself, that Fat See Lo, his friend and in a way his business partner in Shanghai, had recommended that a return cargo be given to the junk captain's charge, and he dared not offend a man more powerful than he in the open port that faced the Outside Kingdom. So he swallowed the compunction that he felt against the man personally and did not let his private feelings cloud his merchant's judgment, nor yet stand in more ill favor with the gods than he was at present.

Therefore, even now were the sampans plying between the shore and the junk, and her sides were sinking lower as the cargo weighted her hold. To be sure, this kept the mariner loitering near the trouble that his sentiment had made, but he must soon be off, for So Ling Gee was seeing to it that all

possible haste was being made to load him, though now he half wished that he might have taken So Wo Loie in the first instance and been off, for he had no doubt that any one who possessed her would fall under the shadow of ill luck, even as he had himself.

Meanwhile So Wo Loie, sitting serenely under the protecting shadow of the goddess's sleeve awaiting the will of the gods to leave it only for them, communicated with the outer world apparently only through the faithful Li Sing. The little maid attended upon her almost constantly, with only now and then a brief excursion to the inner apartment, that she might help out the somewhat meager fare of the nunnery with the offerings of the home Kitchen Gods. Upon this particular occasion she had not eluded the somewhat relaxed vigilance of So Fi, who finding her returning to the temple with a basket, insisted upon accompanying her, for the Mean One had not yet lost the idea that once she could tempt the truant back, there was still a chance of making her see reason and deserting her purpose fully for the protection of the *yamen* and the peace of all.

"Why does she deny herself to me, her loving mother-in-law?" she demanded of Li Sing after a fruitless argument that ended only when they had come to the square before the temple. "Surely at such a time she should desire my ministrations."

"Oh, Shining Light of our House," the little maid told her for at least the hundredth time, "she counts herself as one already dead."

"But she is not dead yet," the mistress contended. "The fortune teller," and she cast a scowling glance at Wang Ho, who sat apparently lost in profound meditation under his tinkling charms, "has as yet found no lucky day for her to consummate her act."

Li Sing sighed hopelessly and edged toward the temple steps, hoping to escape the useless reiteration.

"She insists she is a widow," she said, as boldly as she dared; "a widow she will be, and as she may not again be a wife, her place is by her husband's side."

Only too well So Fi saw the hidden point of this and lost her solicitous pose. "She is a brazen baggage who defies us," she shrilled. "She would have gone most willingly with this Famosan mariner and denied her widowhood, her modesty and her virtue, yet she will not enter the mandarin's inner apartment with honor to herself and profit to us. Her purity is but a mask of deceit behind which she laughs at us. Go and attend her, then," she commanded, "since she will not see me."

"Yes, Soft Breath of Filial Incense," chattered Li Sing, and turned and fled into the temple, glad enough to escape to its peace.

So Fi glared after her, for as a relative of her who was now an inmate she might not follow unless it was by So Wo Loie's special request. Since that

might not be, she earnestly and ardently wished that So Wo Loie might now be permanently removed so as not to vex her with a presence over which she no longer had any control.

Turning, she saw Wang Ho sitting placidly beneath his umbrella, apparently careless of the gods whom he professed to serve, or at least negligent of the duty he should perform in this instance. She crossed quickly and belligerently to him.

"Have you not as yet found the lucky day for my daughter-in-law's departure?" she demanded in a tone that seemed to imply that if he had not he had been remiss in his duties.

"No, not as yet, most worshipful mistress," the fortune teller replied placidly. "I have consulted the stars, but they are clouded."

So Fi sniffed contemptuously. "Are you sure they are not displeased with her attempted sacrifice, and by the knot in the cord showed their displeasure?" she asked pointedly.

"Nay, you, who are most honored by it, must know her sacrifice is the highest act of piety," Wang Ho reminded her. "It is most acceptable to the gods, but," he added, nodding his head shrewdly, "she should first have consulted me, their interpreter, so that the proper date for the meritorious deed had been selected."

Seeing that so far as piety was concerned she could not shake the stand of the seer, So Fi chose another point of attack. "Could she not return to

my loving care until the day is found?" she inquired, attempting by her voice to convey the impression that her first and only concern was for her daughter-in-law.

"Not now," the old man replied, letting almost a note of regret seep into his voice. "Having already dedicated herself to the All Compassionate One, she must remain under her protection until her departure to the Land of Shades. But be comforted that she has respected your teachings so thoroughly. Take back her memory to comfort your lonely household."

"The gods give me little comfort," So Fi complained.

"But is not he who echoes their will worth a cash or two for his counsel?" he asked.

"Like most prophets, you tell little and ask much," So Fi told him ungraciously.

Wang Ho's eyes narrowed behind the shield of his glasses. "Those who do not appreciate the gods' interpreter do not appreciate the gods themselves," he warned her, "nor are they likely to hear aught to their own good who have no thought of the good of others."

"You have told me nothing worth hearing," the old dame complained, "therefore I will not pay you."

Wang Ho folded his hands complacently upon his round paunch. "They who deny sustenance to the gods' servant deny the gods themselves," and

he closed his eyes, thereby dismissing her from his thoughts and his presence.

But So Fi, with irritation fresh upon her mind, was in no mood for dismissal. Across the square loomed the *hong* of her husband, its door invitingly open. He at least must give ear to her, for her troubles were his, and she proposed to make them even more so, so she toddled across and into his presence. He looked up frowning from his abacus, for her presence at home was distracting enough without intruding upon his business.

"Why are you here so near the time of the evening rice?" he inquired.

"I was striving to learn how close the lucky day may be that rids us of the shadow of our despicable daughter-in-law," she replied, opening the unpleasant subject.

So Ling Gee frowned. "There will be no lucky day, for her shadow has darkened even the luck god of my *hong*," he complained. "Will she see you yet?" he asked quickly, looking for a vague hope.

"Alas, no," and his wife shook a discouraged head. "In spite of all my tender messages, she will see no one of the household but Li Sing."

"It is all your fault," her husband told her, striving to lay the blame on any other shoulders. "Had you but treated her otherwise under your care she would not now have defied the authority of me, her father-in-law."

"Oh, most unworthy lord, the fault is yours," and So Fi rose to the defense of her own authority. "For the son that I gave you, your only son, you must pick a coolie weed from a dry rice paddy and bring her home to our house, even in the hour of his departure."

"It was so that her sturdy stock might live strongly mated to your feeble son," So Ling Gee defended. "The fault is yours who gave me such a child."

"Ai, ai, ai," and So Fi's voice rose in a mocking wail. "Now he reviles me, me the mother of his only son. Rather revile yourself," she spat at him. "Had I a husband worthy of the name, ah, what a son would I have borne," she boasted.

"It serves me right I did not take a concubine," So Ling Gee returned contemptuously.

"Hear the man, a concubine," and she cackled with derisive laughter. "You gave me but one child, I returned you a son, and then you would have a concubine. Look to yourself, not to me."

"Cease, woman, cease," her lord commanded. "The fault is beyond the remedying of either of us now. One son we had, and of him but a daughter-in-law. The fact remains that she was in your hands to raise, and she has cost us both our face."

"I will not take the blame for that alone," So Fi protested shrilly. "You brought her to our house."

"Take yourself off," her lord commanded, having

no real argument to combat her with. "I will not have you clatter at me in my very *hong*. Your tongue is never quiet and peace flees at your approach. I can almost find it in my heart to forgive So Wo Loie for seeking the silence to escape you."

"A shame upon you," she flashed back vixenishly. "I who made your bed, mothered your son and sat beside your Kitchen Gods so long——"

"Too long, woman, too long," he interrupted wearily.

But So Fi, once started, was not easily silenced. "It is because of your lack of appreciation that the Compassionate One there had punished you," she cried. "Ai, ai, ai, ai," and she took up her wail again. "It is a judgment of the gods upon you for turning on the mother of your only son."

"It is the visitation of the God of Discord for every man who takes a woman into his house," So Ling Gee replied bitterly.

"Yet will you leave us to ourselves in peace?" she cried triumphantly. "No!" and she answered her own question with greater triumph. "What is it that has brought this present shame upon your house? Man's desire for a woman, and not one man's alone. Their eyes are blinded by her beauty, their senses leave them, and then it is we whom they blame. Why, even Yet Hing Chow——"

"Who speaks my name and mentions not my illustrious and respectful title?" demanded a heavy and indignant voice behind them, and both turned

to find the mandarin, attended only by a single lictor, darkening the door of the *hong*.

So Fi was the first to recover herself and dropped her shrill voice to a whine. "O Worthy and Illustrious Wearer of the peacock feather," she cried, dropping to her knees and all but beating her forehead upon the floor, "I was but regretting the conduct of my unworthy daughter-in-law in failing to observe the honor that is due you."

But Yet Hing Chow had heard too much to be easily pacified. "That she should have begun with you, who had her teaching in your hands," he reminded her severely.

"Therefore, accept the reproof," So Ling Gee snarled at her, assuming his authority once more, "and get you back to the seclusion of my inner apartment."

So Fi scrambled to her feet, not that she feared her lord, but glad enough to escape from the official presence.

"I go, O worshipful controller of my mean actions," and she toddled out, but the expression of her face gave the lie to her contrite action.

Yet Hing Chow looked after her frowning. Then he turned back to the thoroughly discomfited merchant.

"You seem to have little control over any of the women of your household, worshipful sir," he remarked coldly, and for once the discomfited So Ling Gee had nothing to reply. "Has a lucky day been

found as yet?" Yet Hing Chow asked as the merchant remained silent.

"No, not as yet," he replied sullenly.

"Perhaps, then, it is just as well if I inquire," and the mandarin took his way across the square with becoming dignity, even with the lack of his usual attendant train.

Wang Ho observed his approach, also remarking mentally the absence of his habitual pomp. Nor did he fail to note that So Ling Gee slunk after him to hear with his own ears if official awe were any better in forcing the gods' hands than was a merchant's cash. The fortune teller awaited their presence placidly.

"What say the stars, Celestial seer?" the mandarin demanded, dropping a bit of silver on the table.

Wang Ho picked it up quietly and dropped it into his bowl. "As yet they have not spoken, August Sir," he replied. "To-night I will again hold communion with them," and he folded his hands as though it were vain to ask questions of the stars while yet the sun was in the sky.

So Ling Gee edged closer. "Is there no chance that the lucky day may not arrive?" he asked as if something must be told for the silver spent. "Perhaps the gods frown on the behavior of my unfilial daughter-in-law."

"The gods approve her acts," Wang Ho told him with quiet finality. "It is only that she did not

consult their will as to the day that they knotted the cord to delay her."

"Then find the lucky day and quickly," Yet Hing Chow commanded, as though he could order the gods as he was accustomed to order men. "Let us have done with her offending presence, for I am almost of the mind to drag her from the temple to my *yamen*."

Wang Ho dropped his placid pose and drew himself up with dignity. "Even the authority of the Son of Heaven himself stops at the steps of the shrine of the All Compassionate One," he reminded him severely.

"No woman is worth braving the goddess's anger for, O August Sir," cried So Ling Gee, now thoroughly alarmed.

"Who knows—who knows?" Yet Hing Chow frowned darkly, regarding the temple with a speculative eye.

Forgetful of his dignity the merchant seized his arm. "Think no sacrilege, I pray you," he begged. "Come into my *hong* and in the talk of men let us forget the folly of women." And he drew the mandarin with him across the square.

He noticed thankfully that the sun was getting low. The time of evening rice was approaching. He would dispatch the lictor for his master's chair, then get him to the *yamen*. To invade the temple would stir the populace to something near rebellion and bring not only a reproof but possibly the Yel-

low Cord from the Forbidden City, and that would mean not only ruin for the mandarin but for So Ling Gee himself, with what must come out in investigation. The main thing now must be to temporize.

As the sun lowered into the west, Li Sing within the temple realized that the time for evening rice was drawing near and that she must go and attend upon the Kitchen Gods. She replaced the empty bowls in her basket, washed the chopsticks, then sighed reluctantly.

"Is there naught else that I can do for you?" she asked her mistress.

So Wo Loie smiled and shook her head. "Naught else," she told her. "I am as one already dead, but I die happy, for I die for love."

"Could you not live without it?" the little maid asked wistfully, for her own world would be darkened when there was no So Wo Loie to lighten it with her presence.

"I would not care to try," she told her. "Death shall be my triumph."

"Ai, ai, ai," Li Sing wailed softly, "I cannot bear to lose you, mistress."

"I am not lost but saved," So Wo Loie assured her. "Some day love will come to you, then you will know."

But Li Sing shook her head sadly and gathered the utensils into her basket. Love was not for her, at least such love as this. Slave she was in body,

mind and soul, and bound to the house which she served, her only escape a marriage they would one day make for her, and that to a man whom she would never see until carried to his house in the red chair. The only love that she would ever have to stir her gentle heart would be that which she bestowed upon her children, and they must come to her of a stranger, not a mate.

So Wo Loie followed her out upon the temple porch, the farthest confines of her sanctuary. The street was quiet now, the shops deserted, for within the evening meal was all but ready and the day all but done. Only Wang Ho sat placidly beneath his umbrella, dreaming behind his glasses. So Wo Loie slipped to the corner of the porch nearest him and called, "O worthy seer, do you see the lucky day as yet?"

He roused from his musing, lifted his kind old eyes and smiled at her. "Not as yet, worthy mistress."

So Wo Loie sighed contentedly and looked about the quiet street, then turned her head to the red disk of the sun sinking behind the peaked roofs.

"Then I have another day to dream," she sighed happily. "O worthy seer," and she turned back to him with softening eyes, "had I many *taels,* they would all be yours to find the kind gods' will. But I have only my prayers and the best wishes of one upon the threshold of death for the good of all your house. Consult the stars then for me tonight, read

them carefully, and if the signs are kind, know that my spirit will haunt your household joss and bring you luck."

The old man's eyes misted, for he had no house, no settled joss and altar, and none to tend it, nor yet descendants to worship at his tablet, yet he replied kindly, "Mistress, I will."

So Wo Loie turned back to Li Sing, now waiting to depart. "Good night," she said, "and come to me again to-morrow. But first seek him for whom I go and tell him that I take his image with me," and she turned to the temple door.

Li Sing, sobbing softly, fell upon her knees and bowed her devoted head against the temple steps. There was something about her mistress now, a something that this love, living in the very shadow of death, had made for her, which surrounded her with an aura as though she herself had become a goddess and not the mortal that Li Sing had known, and so she bowed and kept her face against the steps in silent prayer.

Meanwhile the sampan of Ho Fah Lee rode up to the dock from the junk where he had been inspecting the rapid loading of the cargo. By the next day it would be safely aboard and with it every excuse that he could make for delay. Still, he felt that he could not leave, and cast a savage glance at the *hong* as he waved his coolies back and crossed the square on his way to the tea house.

Suddenly the voice of Wang Ho halted him, "Luck be upon your ventures, worthy sir."

Ho Fah Lee turned. "The smile of the Luck God upon your illustrious house, O worthy seer," he returned, then recognizing Li Sing as she rose to her feet, he crossed to her and asked eagerly, "Has your mistress any message for me?"

Li Sing shook her head. "She only waits the lucky day to welcome the embrace of the Red Cord," she told him, "this time so tight about her neck that it may swing her to her ancestors."

"Cannot you persuade her to live, even for my sake?" he asked.

Again Li Sing sorrowfully shook her head. "With the thought of you in her heart she will not live with another, if live she should. You cannot oppose the mandarin, and he is set upon her."

"The Luck God has turned his face from me," the mariner complained.

"How do you know, since you have not consulted him?" and the voice of Wang Ho cut into their interview.

Ho Fah Lee turned and shook his head. "Of what use is there now?" he asked discouragingly.

Wang Ho held out the bamboo tube of fortune sticks and shook them. "Had you not better see?" he asked encouragingly.

"Pray do, worthy sir," Li Sing urged. "There may yet be a way."

The mariner crossed to the table, threw some cash into Wang Ho's bowl, and, taking the fortune sticks, began to shake them. Li Sing edged closer, watching eagerly until one fell. Wang Ho bent over it, looking at it closely through his glasses. The low red finger of the sinking sun lay on it with a warm promise.

"It is the sign of luck," the old fortune teller said, with a smile.

"For me?" asked Ho Fah Lee eagerly.

"For your ears alone," Wang Ho informed him, sitting back and staring at the interested little maid.

Ho Fah Lee turned kindly to Li Sing. "Return to your house," he told her. "But keep always as much as you can in the courtyard. Then if at any time you hear a sailor's song, slip out and follow it."

She nodded and turned away in disappointment, with a regretful look at the uninterpreted sign of luck.

"I go, my lord," she said obediently. "The gods smile upon you," and she teetered off along the streets, in which the shadows were now falling.

Ho Fah Lee looked about to see if any were in earshot. But the street was deserted, though the lanterns of night were not yet lit.

"Now, what says the Luck God?" he demanded eagerly.

"It concerns your sailing day," Wang Ho told him, studying the sign intently. "You have delayed

long here, sir. The lucky time for you to sail is the night of the full moon."

"And leave So Wo Loie here under the shadow of the Red Cord?" he cried. "Why the moon is at the full to-morrow," and he realized that before the highest hour of the sun his cargo would be aboard. "No, I will not go," he said determinedly.

Wang Ho spread his hands in a wide gesture. "I but give you the sign the gods pass down to me. Your lucky sign of sailing is with the rising of the full moon."

But Ho Fah Lee could see no lucky sign that was not bound with hers, and if ill luck attended both, that at least he was determined to share, and so he said with determination, "No, no, for I must see her safely on her way to join her lord."

Wang Ho peered intently at the stick, then shook his head dubiously. "I do not read it here in the sign," he told him.

"I will not leave her," the mariner contended stubbornly.

"Not if I tell you something else?" asked the old fortune teller shrewdly.

Wang Ho looked full into his eyes, then said impressively, "The lucky day for her is in your sign."

"What do you mean?" asked the young man puzzled.

"That only when you leave will the lucky day arrive for her to again stand under the Red Cord."

"Then I will never leave," Ho Fah Lee cried triumphantly.

The old man smiled and shook his head. "Your sign reads otherwise," he insisted. "Your junk must take the moon path, and on the morrow the moon is at the full, and not until you go shall the lucky day arrive for her."

"I do not understand," the other objected.

"You are the knot the hand of fate tied," Wang Ho told him. "When once you go, then will the knot be loosened to perform its office."

"Never then will the knot be loosened."

"Yet the signs command you to depart," the reader insisted.

"That I will never do without her."

Wang Ho shrugged his shoulders as though to tip the burden of the decision from them. "Then as you will," he said dispassionately. "I but read the signs the gods give me."

"The gods speak in riddles," the mariner complained.

"Which are for mortals to guess," replied their oracle. "The Luck God's smile is on you if you leave, but not until you depart will the knot be loosened from the Red Cord."

"Then I cannot read the sign of luck," Ho Fah Lee muttered sulkily.

"I give you all I may," and with that Wang Ho arose and began gathering his paraphernalia deliberately, for the streets were beginning to fill with

appetizing smells that called him to things less spiritual but quite as pleasant.

The young man eyed him darkly. "There is something more behind what you have told me."

The old man stopped and smiled. "There is my good will for you," he said quietly, "and that of the gods I serve. You have been generous and brave. Even under the shadow of the peacock's feather you have been fearless, but there is no luck for you here, although you brought it with you. The Goddess of Mercy is your patroness, and her smile is upon the seas, therefore it is for you to go back across the waters where lies your home."

"I am a bird of passage," the young man replied sadly. "I build no nest where I have no mate. The gods mock me as do you, their voice."

The old man stopped his preparations to depart and for the first time lost the air of tranquillity in which he habitually wrapped himself. "You mock yourself with a thick wit!" he cried irritably. "Had I your youth and strength and desire, I soon would find the answer to what you call a riddle."

"Give me some clue," the young man begged.

"Look to your sea bird's wings and in your heart," Wang Ho told him. "I may not speak more plainly. To-morrow night the moon path leads out to the sea—take it. The wind of luck attend you," and he folded up his umbrella and closed his boxes.

"I thank you for the kindness of your thought," the young man said. "Peace be upon your house."

"And on your flight," and with this final counsel the old man gathered up his folding stand, tucked it under his arm, and with the umbrella on his shoulder went down the narrow street along which the lanterns had begun to gleam like glow worms in the gathering gloom.

The mariner watched his departure with a puzzled frown drawing his brows together. Used more to the solitude of the waters and the directness of an active life, it took him long to define the subtleties of speech. He knew that Wang Ho was offering him veiled advice, and that even more than the rest of the village he realized the problem the young man was facing. Of a certainty, before the morrow's sun had climbed to mid-heaven, there would be no legitimate excuse for him to remain longer in the village, or even ashore, for that matter. He had the old man to thank for the cargo he was to take back, but he was affected by more than the cargo. So Wo Loie he had not seen since the day of the ceremony. Messages she had sent to him and he to her through the faithful Li Sing, but for the safety of each they had forborne looking into each other's eyes. Ho Fah Lee had little doubt of what lay there for him, but that it must be soon covered by the film of death stirred him as it stirred few of his countrymen, for the companionship that he craved of her was more than that of mothering a brood, though that would have been the final joy of both.

He sighed heavily and turned to the temple. Drawing a punk from his sleeve, he lit it at the porch taper and stuck it in the bowl of ashes where others smouldered, but it was less an offering to the goddess than to her who crouched under the protection of her sleeve. How to tempt her from that shadow was now his problem, or so Wang Ho seemed to desire to make him understand. But as yet, being deeply religious and regarding Kwan Yam with more devotion than even the men of the village, no way appeared to him. He looked through the temple door to the calm face of his deity and hers. No answer lay there, and he envied the peace that placid countenance reflected, a peace far from the seething tumult of his puzzled heart. He turned from the mockery of it and took his way to the tea house, there to brood over untasted rice, while the moon, the all but full moon, made a path upon the river that the signs said he must take, and take alone.

So Wo Loie too was looking at that same moon, had he but realized it, at that very moment, but within the cloistered quiet of the temple garden. It was a lovers' lamp lit by the kindly hand of night to light her way to dreams, more beautiful, perhaps, because of their futility. And she bethought her of an ancient legend of a daughter of the sky who used the moon path as a bridge to span the wide spaces of eternity and meet her lover, and So Wo Loie used it even so for mortal thoughts to

teach the feet of her spirit that they might return when she too sought the sky.

But the moon faded before the next day's sun, whose pitiless rays lighted not the problem of the lovers, rather showing it in the hard light of reality. Ho Fah Lee, awaking from an uneasy slumber that had the morning star for its riding light, turned from his bunk aboard his craft with the chattering of the sampan coolies, the whine of hoisting blocks and the shouting of his crew as the last of the return cargo came aboard. Riceless he rose and watched the busy scene, but with no joyous eye. The folded mat sail lay against the mast, nor had he any wish to spread it to the breeze or order out the *yulohs* to aid him with the current. The freight he was to carry was an irksome one. Always it seemed he dropped down this river with only a load of disappointment, and he realized that when he left it now it would be forever. The God of Hunger robbed him once of his desire, and now the Hunger God again gnawed at his heart here even in the time of plenty.

He let himself over the side, dropped into a sampan and rowed himself ashore. Ignoring the crowded jetty and the *hong,* he passed on to the tea house, where he might view the temple, an oyster shell he might not force for the pearl of desire that it held. Ignoring food, he gave himself up to the questionable solace of *sam shue,* but this awoke

rather than deadened his senses. Restlessly he left the tea house for the village square where stood the temple porch, and across from it the door of the *hong*. The porch was empty, but from the *hong* along the dock the busy coolies trotted, chanting their monotonous song of labor and rushing the last of the goods into the sampans, for So Ling Gee was in haste to have the junk up anchor and away, taking with it at least one problem that vexed him.

Much to his annoyance another one appeared, for Yet Hing Chow, still hoping against hope, must seek him out again, though their conversation upon the one subject that bound them was as fruitless as had been all the preceding ones. Excusing himself with elaborate courtesy, the merchant craved the mandarin's indulgence as the clerk appeared and announced that the last sampan had left the dock, and presented the bill of lading. So Ling Gee signed it with obvious relief, then turned back to his official, and officious, guest.

But Yet Hing Chow arose with pompous dignity. He was not interested in such merchandise as engrossed the *hong* keeper, and had begun to realize finally that his possession of the coveted article had ended at the temple door of Kwan Yam. The knot of the Red Cord had not been untied by parental hands during the delay, and the waiting days were merely interludes, irritating ones at that, to the final act of unfilial behavior that would forever thwart him of possession.

"There seems to be no more that we may say to each other," he told the badgered merchant. "You had the one thing I desired; I still desire it, but it has passed from your hands. Since you cannot bear the bud back to your garden, my favor cannot flower for you," and he made a sign to the waiting and ever attendant lictor to summon his chair.

So Ling Gee followed him to the door. He could not deny that he had exhausted all his efforts to induce So Wo Loie to forego her purpose. Now the veiled threat of withdrawal of all patronage showed him that the mandarin would see to it that he paid in heavy "squeeze" for the affront that worthy had suffered. The merchant's rage was helpless, hopeless, and for the moment voiceless. But as he emerged from the *hong* he caught sight of the loitering figure of the mariner.

With the last of the cargo already rowing to the junk, there was no reason for him to be ashore—in fact, quite the opposite. As master of his craft he should be aboard her and overseeing the loading, so that he might sign the manifest, up anchor and spread his sail for the outward voyage. But for the moment it was a relief to find an object upon which So Ling Gee might spit out his wrath.

"There stands the real author of your discomfort and mine," he cried, shaking an accusing finger at Ho Fah Lee. "It is for him that my unworthy daughter-in-law has confused us both. It is to his patroness that she has fled and from that shelter

defies us. The stranger has bewitched her, and since I would not give her to him it is he who has instructed So Wo Loie to take away my face."

The young man turned angrily and crossed to the pair. "A shame upon your words," he cried. "Did I not offer to leave her even under the shadow of this worthy mandarin's protection?"

"It was a trick," So Ling Gee contended. "You still linger here after your business is finished. Is not my return cargo aboard your junk even now? Why are you ashore? Why do you not sail with my goods?"

The questions were legitimate and for the moment unanswerable. The young man looked into the scowling face of the mandarin, who, too, seemed waiting for his answer, then he glanced back behind him to the figure of old Wang Ho, sitting quietly but nevertheless attentively at his fortune-telling table across the square.

"I await a lucky day," he replied, taking a cue from that presence.

"And so does she," cried the indignant merchant. "It seems that your lucky days depend upon each other."

"Upon each other?" echoed Ho Fah Lee, something dawning suddenly in his mind as he remembered the seer's counsel of the day before.

"Did you not wait her lucky day before?" demanded So Ling Gee. "Do you not now strive to delay until she stands again beneath the Red Cord?"

"What if I do?" replied the mariner coolly. "It is a sacred rite that I would witness."

"Then I forbid it," So Ling Gee told him.

Ho Fah Lee regarded him coldly. "You have no authority over me," he reminded him.

"But I have over my cargo," the merchant insisted. "I command you to set sail with it at once."

"I am master of my junk," Ho Fah Lee replied. "I will set sail only when I wish."

"O Most Worthy Official," and the merchant appealed to Yet Hing Chow. "I make complaint against this man. I charge him with piracy."

"Piracy!" cried the astonished mariner.

Yet Hing Chow regarded him with frowning ponderosity. "Goods taken unlawfully upon the waters constitute piracy and its punishment is decapitation," he told him in his best judicious mien. "I command you to take the cargo out of my district or I shall declare you outlawed."

But Ho Fah Lee had recovered himself and his wits and bowed smilingly to the official. "Your command is already obeyed," he told him.

The mandarin swelled with righteous indignation. "How dare you affront me with such a statement?" he demanded.

But the young man refused to be overawed. "With all due respect to you, O Most August Sir," and he bowed profoundly, if ironically, "I would point out that your district ends there, at the river's

edge. Therefore, my junk and So Ling Gee's goods are even now beyond your jurisdiction."

"But you are not," bellowed the outwitted official. "Too long have you defied me to my face with your Outside Kingdom impertinence. So Ling Gee is right. Since his cargo is aboard your junk and you are holding it unlawfully, you are a pirate. I command you now to be on your way with it to its proper destination or suffer the consequences. If you value your head, let me not find you ashore or your junk in the river after sunset. I have spoken by the authority of the Son of Heaven."

"And if I refuse to go?" Ho Fah Lee asked quietly.

"I have mercifully warned you," the mandarin informed him.

So Ling Gee bowed over his clasped hands and smiled at the return of official favor. "O Most Illustrious upholder of the law, I thank you."

"I must await a favorable breeze," the mariner contended.

"It is upon the river even now," the mandarin informed him. "Make use of it or brave the breath of my anger."

And with that he turned, for the banging of gongs and the squealing of pipes announced the arrival of his retinue and chair, which he mounted with becoming dignity as the eager populace, crowding in from the shops and byways, stared open-mouthed at

the Great Presence, though behind his back they put their tongues in their cheeks and accounted only too well the reason why he haunted the square with such frequency since the day of the postponed ceremony.

Though the glory of his own presence blinded the mandarin to this, So Ling Gee was unfortunately only too well aware of it and the reflection that it cast upon him. He realized only too assuredly what was being said behind his back, though he strove to keep his face in the presence of it. He watched Yet Hing Chow's host pompously depart, standing with a reverence he by no means felt. Then as the procession and its attendants disappeared around the corner and the street returned once more to its business, he cast a malignant glance at Ho Fah Lee.

"May the shadow of ill luck that you have cast upon my house depart with you," he fervently told him.

But the mariner was unmoved by his threats, even as he had been of Yet Hing Chow's. His life as a sailor had cast him in rough places, and danger added but a spice to his career. Besides, if his position had been made uncomfortable by official displeasure, he was more than half aware that the merchant's was also, therefore he had a ready answer for him.

"Had you but kept your bargain as an honest merchant, the Luck God would have smiled upon your house and mine," he reminded him. "My

house is empty now, but so too is your own, and if the shadow of the peacock's feather is upon my present, it will fall even more darkly upon your future."

"It will lighten with your absence," So Ling Gee contended, turning into the door of the *hong* with a swaggering courage that he by no means felt.

Ho Fah Lee turned away and walked across the square toward the tea house. Passing the table of Wang Ho, he saw the old gentleman's placid face illuminated by one of his rare, slow smiles. The eyes behind the round glasses twinkled for an instant, then the film of his set philosophic calm veiled them.

"Last night I looked again upon the stars," he said slowly, "but the radiance of the moon shamed them. I saw it weave a rippling path down to the great water along the twisting reaches of the little water that runs so surely to it. You, sir, who know more of the waters than I, must see now how surely you must take that path. I, who know more of the will of heaven than of the ways of earth, you treat as some poor pilot come aboard. Yet when you sailed the Yangtze and came to the great rapids, did you master them alone or take yourself a pilot? That your junk rides safely there," and he pointed to her sunk deep with cargo in mid-stream, "proves that you were not so blind to your own safety then as you are now. My suggestion of last night is now backed up by official command. Nor do I say

this in defense of my art, but as a proof of my good thought of you and others."

The young man bowed his head in shame. "You should take counsel of the old," he admitted, "and I was a good son to my aged father. It is not through disrespect of you, worthy sir, that I have flouted your advice, but that my desire outran my judgment. That one should give her life for me demands a like return, therefore I stay."

"But to what end?" the old man cried. "Do you think that one sacrifice calls for another, when both are useless? Ai, for the eyes of age in the head of youth, for the brains of time and the heart of spring. When the rowers bend to the oars, does the master not cast off the cable? Study your own craft, my son. A pirate you have been called, a pirate you will be made. Then go aboard and study how a pirate would act, since you are to be made one, whether by your own will or no."

"But I am not, I am an honest junk captain," Ho Fah Lee told him.

"Then be one and up anchor and be off. The moon rises early, but before that the sun will set, and with its setting you will be outlawed. The sun path for you now, for the moon path was yours last night."

"The moon path," the mariner repeated, thinking of a forgotten legend.

The old man waved him away with an impa-

tient gesture. "Go," he commanded, "take your thoughts to some profit and leave me to my own," and he closed his eyes and folded his hands across his paunch in a sign of dismissal.

The young man regarded him for a moment in hurt surprise. Then he turned and looked pleadingly to the blank face of the temple porch. It was as placid as the countenance of the goddess whom it sheltered, and as non-committal, yet behind it lay his problem, if not the solution of it. That, the seer had intimated, lay in his own hands, and by his efforts alone now he must find it.

He looked about the streets along which the busy villagers moved. He did not think like those upon the land, and now he found he could not think upon the land at all. The water was his element; he had solved its many mysteries; perhaps now it might solve his. Slowly he crossed to the dock, untied the painter of the sampan and propelled it into the stream.

So Ling Gee, looking from the window of his office, saw him proceeding to his junk, and smiled, if not with triumph, at least with satisfaction. With him gone, with this news conveyed to the rebel within the temple there, perhaps she would lend an ear to kindly counsel, or at least to what was reason in the mouths of others. Had this stranger who had brought so much discord only have departed before, much had been saved them all, including her.

If he had stayed on, her very stubbornness would have made her try the Red Cord again, yes, and to the undoing of all concerned.

So Ling Gee watched the sampan eat the distance up. Now Ho Fah Lee was scrambling up the side of the junk. The merchant would send word to Yet Hing Chow as soon as the junk had rounded the Tiger Head, and when he showed him the empty stretch of the river he would see that Li Sing made her mistress take full note of it also. He would see that no lucky day could be found, for all Wang Ho's star-gazing. That he would cloud with silver if it took a *shoe* to do it. Once let this mariner be gone, and half the present problem might be solved and in time the whole of it.

But though throughout the rest of the day So Ling Gee kept his eyes upon the junk, there was no movement of departure about her. The sailors lolled upon the deck at ease, smoking and chatting as they sunned themselves upon the deck load. The sail lay idle against the mast, nor was it hoisted to catch the breeze that came in steady breaths down the river, aiding the current. The merchant let the business of the *hong* take care of itself as he sat with eyes glued on the craft; but still it rode, like a becalmed water fowl too lazy to spread wing.

Another watcher was old Wang Ho. Scarcely had Ho Fah Lee departed than his closed eyes opened to follow the wake of his sampan. From then on through the slow afternoon he kept his quiet

gaze fixed upon the junk and smiled quietly to himself when no movement appeared aboard and naught stirred about it but its lazy swinging to the current. The lulling of his trade gave him all leisure to watch it, and as he did he dreamt of a youth far behind him, a youth as hot, as rash, yes, and as foolish, as that of the captain who vainly strove to fit words of mature wisdom to the actions of his fierce desire.

Still other eyes looked out upon the river, eyes that for the time were closed to the world about her, for So Wo Loie, from the temple garden, saw the junk riding there, and knowing not the tumult raging on her quiet deck, saw only the floating home of her lover, the avenue of escape now barred to her, and it swam before her in a flood of tears.

And so the sun of the afternoon burnt up the hours into the red embers of twilight. So Ling Gee, disgusted with his fruitless vigil, dispatched one of his clerks to the *yamen* to report the confirmed piracy, now that the official command had been disregarded. Then he departed to his house to eat the evening rice, salted with the unshed tears of rage.

Quiet settled on the village streets once more. Appetizing odors filled the evening air, but apparently did not assail the nostrils of Wang Ho, for he still sat placidly behind his table, nor seemed inclined to pack up his belongings and depart for the night. Along the golden floor of the water he saw the fishing sampans glide out into the stream

and point their dark noses into the afterglow. They seemed like moving shadows on the bright side of a golden lantern, the shadow pictures that revolve grotesquely about the heat within. Then slowly they were gone, for the surface of the stream was flat, not round, and they were headed to the fishing grounds below the village.

Only the junk remained now, its fantastic bulk darkly outlined upon the golden surface. Like a dream ship it lay, one ready to put out into a mystic future that lay beyond the sunset in the coming night. The glow of the sky softened and the water dulled with it. Across the other bank the purple of the east was powdered by the rising silver of the moon. But before it appeared to weave a path across the now cold surface of the river a shadow detached itself from the junk and began creeping across the cool floor of the waters toward the shore. Then one appeared at the bow and crept off down the stream as on some secret errand. Another at the stern slunk into the coming dark the other way.

Wang Ho rose, rubbed his glasses and packed his paraphernalia into its lacquered boxes. He folded his umbrella and leaned it against the side of the temple, then laid his kit beside it, yet he made no move to depart, but instead became a part of the temple shadows and kept his eyes about the quiet streets, now deserted in the hour of evening rice.

One of the sampans that he had seen put out now appeared at the jetty by the deserted *hong*. Ho

Fah Lee stepped out upon the dock, followed by a sailor. He looked about the quiet streets, smiled to himself, then turned to his man.

"Yen Hop," he said, "do you know the house of So Ling Gee, the *hong* keeper, in the Street of Celestial Peace?"

"Yes, worthy master."

"Go there, and as you reach the wall, sing 'The Song of the River Pirate.' A maid will follow you. When you have passed beyond sight of the house, bid her await me immediately in the square here. You will find me in the tea house when you return."

"Yes, director of my actions," and the man trotted off along the quiet streets.

Ho Fah Lee repaired to the tea house to wait, unmindful of Wang Ho, who watched him from the shadows. When he had gone, the old man turned down a side street where he knew a cook's stall, there to gulp a bowl of rice and a morsel of fish, washed hastily down with scalding tea. His kit he left to the protection of the shadows and the goddess, for he had a mind to be on hand in the square before the rising of the moon. Although he held communion with the gods, the old fortune teller had an eye and ear ever for the doing of mortals, and preferred his own sight in the present to the mystical gaze that he cast into the future. Let those who would consult him; in affairs of interest he preferred first view of events, and intended to miss nothing that transpired that night.

Even as he returned to the square he saw the sailor trotting back across it, and then took his place once more unnoticed in the shadows.

The man passed on and sought his master in the tea house.

"Did you find the maid?" Ho Fah Lee asked.

"Yes, worthy master, and she is following by another street."

"That is well. Attend me closely," and they returned to the square.

Even as they entered it Li Sing appeared, fearfully hugging the shadows and looking at the deserted stalls of the market place, for their owners chattered at their meals in the back and might turn inquisitive eyes her way. She repressed a little cry as she all but collided with Ho Fah Lee standing in the gloom of the porch shadows of the temple.

"O honorable sir," she gasped, "I attend upon you. What is your will with me?"

"I would see your mistress on the instant. Bid her come at once out upon the temple porch, then you keep watch the while I speak with her."

"Yes, worthy sir," and with a fearful glance she slipped within.

"Is all in readiness to sail at once?" Ho Fah Lee asked of the sailor as they walked back toward the jetty.

"Yes, worthy captain," the man assured him.

The mariner cast his eyes up the river and held

his hand up to test the wind. "Do you think the breeze will drop soon?" he inquired.

The sailor shook his head. "The wind now doubles the strength of the current. It will not drop, master."

"That is well," he returned. "You are sure there are no other junks upon the river?"

"Ours is the only one. We have spied up and down as you commanded. Neither above the Tiger Head nor below the bend is one at anchor."

Ho Fah Lee studied a moment. "There is no other sampan on this shore but ours?" he asked anxiously.

"Ours is the only one," the man returned. "Three lie around the bend just below, a few are at the fishing village, but most of them are on the river, waiting the rising moon.

The mariner nodded with satisfaction, then looked across the open space of water. His eyes swung slowly round the quiet square. The stalls were all but empty. The peace of evening and the lull of trade lay on them. It was as secluded as might be in the midst of so many. Even the moon, her light just tipping the purple of the eastern sky, as yet had not raised her soft face to spy upon him or to make her glittering path across the water.

"Into the boat with you," he commanded his man, "stay there in quiet and wait my orders."

The man bowed and slipped into the sampan, joining his fellows there in silence, not even lighting

the eternal pipe that was their leisure's solace. Their master turned back to the temple porch awaiting impatiently in the deep gloom that it cast upon the square.

Then through the dim lit door, shadowing the shrine of her protection for a moment, So Wo Loie appeared, attended by the trembling Li Sing. A goddess she seemed to Ho Fah Lee, standing there in the mystical light of evening, and then her voice broke the spell and made her sweetly mortal.

"My lord desires my presence?"

"And thanks you for granting it," he replied huskily. "Let your maid keep watch and guard against intrusion, for I must say farewell."

So Wo Loie's hand went quickly to her bosom to still the sudden leaping of her heart. She made a sign to Li Sing, who slipped off to the corner of the square, her eyes peering this way and that.

Her mistress drew a deep breath, then in a trembling voice she echoed, "Farewell?"

"The illustrious mandarin orders me from the district upon pain of death, at the instigation of your angry father-in-law," he told her. "I cannot brave the official displeasure and keep my head, since the law is behind him."

"Oh, lord of my heart," she cried, "you cannot go until I have gone, however. I do not fear to go into darkness when you are near to witness the departure. The gods have given me this respite that I might for a little while enjoy your presence

and thus store my memory for the last long dream to which I go."

"Then must our love be nothing but a dream?" her lover asked.

"What else can it be? I give my life for it. You cannot leave me till the lucky day arrives for my departure."

Ho Fah Lee shook his head sadly. "No, I must leave so that the lucky day arrives for you."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked uncertainly.

"But a little while ago Wang Ho, the fortune teller, found that your lucky day was bound with mine. He bade me sail tonight, following the moon path, and said that not until my departure would a lucky day arrive for you to stand beneath the Red Cord."

So Wo Loie put her hand again to her now quiet bosom. "It was my love for you that made me choose it," she said softly.

"Yes," he replied, "and Wang Ho said that I was the knot in the cord."

At this she smiled and drew the cord, still knotted, from her jacket. "Who can say what unseen hand tied it?" she murmured softly, regarding it in the fading light.

"Perhaps the gods had this hour in mind when they delayed you," he cried.

"What do you mean?"

Suddenly the counsel of old Wang Ho came into

his mind strong and clear now. He saw, with her presence, all the seer had tried to tell him in the mystic language of his craft.

"If the god's voice says my lucky day is bound with yours, and if I must sail away, was it not meant that you should go with me?" he said. "My junk lies on the river. Once aboard her you would be mine to bear to my far island home. 'What happens in Kwang Tung is not known in Famosa,' he reminded her. "Come, make my lucky day your own," and he held out his arms.

But she drew back, looked down at the Red Cord in her hands, then tucked it in her bosom.

"I may not leave the shelter of the All Compassionate One," she reminded him, turning her face to the dim features of the goddess behind them. "I am dedicated to her and cannot break my vow."

"Then I will break it for you," he cried. "We mariners are pirates on occasion. Suppose I seize you and bear you to my junk. My coolies there," and he pointed to the jetty, "are trained to do my bidding. Once aboard with you and I could laugh at the fat mandarin, whose district ends at the water's edge."

"Yes, but the sacrilege," she objected faintly.

"The Goddess of Mercy is my patroness," he reminded her. "She has befriended me through tempest and battle; I know she will be with me through love. Besides, I take you under her protection."

Still, woman like, she dallied with the sweet pros-

pect, thrilling to this wooing and prolonging it, and for once she realized how complete must be her surrender.

"Now mind you," she admonished, "I do not counsel you in this. I am but a woman, small and weak and frail. Your coolies are many and strong and fierce. I know no struggle or outcry would prevail against them."

"No, none," he assured her, "for I am no longer Ho Fah Lee, the peaceful mariner, but a pirate keen upon my prize," and he was about to spring up the temple steps, when Li Sing rushed toward them with a startled cry.

"O worthy master, the mandarin and his attendants are coming through the Street of Great Content. They are almost here."

Ho Fah Lee waved So Wo Loie back. "Into the temple, then," he told her. "If you step out when the street is quiet I will be here."

"I shall be out to gaze upon the moon," she promised, glancing back to where the slow silver of her dawning smile lighted the purple of the rising river mist. Then with her went Li Sing.

Ho Fah Lee turned quickly to the jetty. "Push the sampan into the stream," he commanded. "Row up two *li* and then come back for me," for he did not desire the mandarin to see a boat at the dock, fearing that he might order him to his junk and enforce the command.

The sailors cast off and pushed quickly into the

stream. Ho Fah Lee drew his pipe from his sleeve with affected carelessness and calmly lit it. Into the square came Yet Hing Chow, but not with pomp and ceremony. He was on foot and the sturdy ruffians that attended him carried bamboo staves, not banners, and had an evil look. Glancing around, the mandarin perceived Ho Fah Lee, even as So Ling Gee had said. Against the first soft ripples that marked the rising moon the junk stood out, its sail still furled about the mast and no sign of activity aboard. Also he marked the sampan gliding away up stream, but not in the direction of the craft that lay at anchor. Then he peered closer, making sure, in the uncertain light, of his prey.

He advanced boldly, the lictors at his back. "Why do you loiter here in spite of my commands?" he demanded. "Did I not tell you my disfavor would light upon you unless you raised anchor before sundown?"

"How can I get aboard without my sampan?" the mariner asked quietly.

"Where is it now?" the mandarin asked.

"Already coming for me," and Ho Fah Lee pointed to the river.

"But it was here even as I commanded you to depart."

"I sent it elsewhere," the mariner replied coolly.

"In spite of my commands?"

"Those on shore are under your command, O

Worthy Sir," Ho Fah Lee conceded, "but I command my junk and crew."

"But you are still on shore and under my authority," the mandarin reminded him. "I gave you leave to go and yet you loiter. And always in the same place. I do not like the look of it."

"Your Excellency is too suspicious," the mariner assured him. "I will depart as you command, but in my own good time."

Yet Hing Chow made a quick sign to his minions. "No, since you will remain, it shall be upon the charge of So Ling Gee. Seize him!" and his attendants, only too willing to obey, flung themselves upon Ho Fah Lee.

He struggled uselessly in the grip of too many. "Let me go," he cried.

The mandarin smiled evilly. "You do not seem to appreciate your freedom."

"Let me go," the mariner begged. "I promise to depart when my sampan returns."

Yet Hing Chow frowned and shook his head. "No, since you have remained, the charge of piracy is proven. Later you may return to the temple," he purred, "since the spot appeals to you, and serve as a warning. Take him to the *yamen,*" and he waved his hand.

Realizing the futility of further parley and not desiring to arouse the street, that had not been witness to his arrest, Ho Fah Lee went quietly.

When they had gone Wang Ho stepped from the shadows, shaking his head. He looked about the square. It had not observed the episode, being busy with the afterglow of its evening meal. He shook his head at this unexpected turn of events. His counsel had been followed, but to what end now? And what of her within? Had he best warn her? He pondered this a moment, then discarded the thought. Perhaps the sign of luck might yet hold, for the path was not yet light upon the river.

The moon rose up across the other bank. Lazily her silver fingers touched the water, weaving her rippling path, the path of luck, and still no one appeared upon the quiet street. A nun stole out and lit the light upon the temple porch. It glowed softly in the gathering gloom, pushing the shadows back with a warm hand. Within its circle a cautious form appeared and then another. It was So Wo Loie and Li Sing. Wang Ho stepped back into the darkness, taking up his watch again. So Wo Loie ventured to the edge of the steps and peered about.

"There is no one here," she half whispered.

The maid slipped past her out upon the square and looked around. "Not even a sampan at the dock," she said.

So Wo Loie curbed her rising impatience. "No doubt my lord has rowed out and will return," she told Li Sing, but more to assure herself.

The little maid looked about the square. From the side streets came the stirring of those whose

meal was finished and who were now ready to take up the business or pleasure of the night. Soon they would flow out into the square, and then the chance, if chance it was, would be lost.

"Oh, mistress mine," she begged fearfully, "pray leave all this and return to our home with me. Such trafficking is dangerous."

But So Wo Loie shook her head and only smiled. "Fear not for me, Li Sing," she said softly, "even now the moon lights the path of shadows for me," and she pointed to the river where the silver ribbon of her light was rippling under the tender fingers of the water.

"Rather would I light the lamp of safety for you in our inner apartment," Li Sing sighed, fearing she knew not what.

Her mistress laughed quietly. "Perhaps you may not even light prayer papers."

"I will never cease to pray for you," the maid assured her.

"May I have as little need of prayers for you," So Wo Loie replied. "See," and she pointed to the jetty where a sampan glided silently up. "The shadow of the peacock's feather has moved off, and so my lord returned."

Li Sing slipped to the edge of the porch and peered across. "I do not see him in the sampan," she said, turning back.

"If it is his boat he must be there," So Wo Loie replied. "Inquire."

"Yes, worthy mistress," and she slipped across as one of the sailors stepped out upon the dock.

"Is this the sampan of Ho Fah Lee?" she asked.

"Yes, worthy mistress," the man told her. "I was to await him here."

As he crossed the lighted space with the maid, So Wo Loie leaned out from the temple porch.

"Is he not with you?" she asked anxiously.

"No, worshipful mistress," the man repeated. "He bade me meet him here."

For the first time So Wo Loie's faith faltered. She clutched Li Sing, who now stood beside her.

"The mandarin has departed," she whispered fearfully, "and my lord is not yet here. I fear the sign, for the spies of Yet Hing Chow are everywhere."

Even as she spoke there came the ominous banging of a gong from the direction of the *yamen.* Li Sing rushed down the steps and started in the direction of the sound.

"What is it, what is it?" cried So Wo Loie, all but leaving the protection of the porch in her excitement.

"It is the mandarin's runners," Li Sing told her, still peering through the shadows. "I cannot see," then suddenly she turned and hurried up the steps, forcing her mistress toward the temple door. "Go in, go in," she told her, trembling.

"No, I will not go in," and So Wo Loie strove to look past her.

Roused by the discordant music of the gong, the curious villagers came crowding out into the square.

"For your own sake you must go in," the maid commanded, for once taking the initiative. "I will stay and be your eyes and ears," and she drew her mistress through the temple door.

"Come to me at once and let me know," So Wo Loie cried as Li Sing half led, half forced her to the door behind the altar.

"Yes, yes," she promised breathlessly, "but go, go quickly," and she all but pushed her into the inner sanctuary, closed the door behind her and sped back to the square.

But now the square was packed with excited villagers attracted by the official signal. As Li Sing looked out from the shelter of the porch she saw the *yamen* runners coming through a side street. In their midst was Ho Fah Lee, and behind them attendants bearing a bamboo cage. Their bobbing lanterns lit his set face, but he walked with head erect and with a scornful manner. The runners forced the crowd back and came to a halt almost at the foot of the temple steps.

As the attendants opened the back of the cage and placed it in position, the head lictor unrolled an official scroll and, reading by the aid of a lantern held above his head, addressed the crowd.

"By command of the servant of the Son of Heaven, Yet Hing Chow, mandarin of the district of Show Hang, upholder of the law, you, Ho Fah

Lee, for the malicious act of piracy, do hereby stand condemned to decapitation, after being stood here for the space of one day, from moon rise to moon rise, before the temple of the Goddess of Mercy, as a warning to all eyes that fall upon your disgrace, thus giving an example to evildoers of the fate in store for them who defy the justice of the law."

The runners had stood the mariner upon his toes within the cage and fastened the top about his neck so that he could not let the weight of his body down. Thus they left him while the lictor pasted the scroll that he had read upon the frame, so that all those who had not heard his voice might know the nature of his crime and punishment. Then he addressed the prisoner himself.

"It shall be unlawful for any one to ease the burden imposed on you, or give you food or drink in the next cycle of hours. Give thanks to the clemency of my worthy master that you are mercifully decapitated and not boiled lingeringly in oil, or split and drawn. This space of time is given you to regret your crime and gratefully contemplate the mercy shown you."

The crowd murmured and drew back. The runners and lictors had finished their work. No fear of any villager interfering with the prisoner, for that would bring them under the fearful sign of the unicorn. No matter what their sympathies might be, they could only be manifested in secret words, not open deeds, for in matters of criminal justice

the mandarin's acts were unquestionable and upheld by the Son of Heaven.

The lictor and the attendants withdrew. Their work was done and naught remained now but the executioner's duty upon the morrow. The crowd gazed awhile in idle curiosity. The sight was not new enough to them to stir any unusual interest, except for the fact that Ho Fah Lee had been in some way connected with the thwarting of the will of the mandarin with So Wo Loie. It was a lesson for them on interfering with official desire, but they were more keen on her coming departure than that of the mariner, who would now pass from them devoid of any ceremony, by the quick route of the headsman's sword. He was but the prologue to the play they waited for, and so after a casual inspection they began moving off.

As the crowd thinned, the sailor slipped behind the cage that held Ho Fah Lee. "I am here, master," he said in a low voice, waiting for some command on which to act.

Old Wang Ho, overhearing it, but remaining still in the shadow, looked out upon the spreading moon path on the river and smiled to himself.

"Back to the dock," the mariner whispered to his man; "the spies are watching."

The sailor slunk off to take counsel with his waiting fellows in the sampan, inspected his boat hook, tested the oars and waited. Once more the square went quiet, and Ho Fah Lee strove with what moves

he might to ease the pain of his position. Li Sing, fascinated by the horror of it all, forgot her promise to return to her mistress with some word, until, looking up suddenly to the temple door, she saw So Wo Loie standing there upon the threshold, impatient of delay, and coming now herself to find out what—she might. One startled look she gave, the figures slinking off down every street, the rising moon, and then, struck by its straight white finger, the tragedy was pointed out to her.

She paused but a moment to take note of it. Wang Ho, watching from the shadows, smiled his cryptic smile and waited. Li Sing, struck dumb by her neglect of duty and fearful now of the consequences of it, stood like an image, frozen by her fright. Ho Fah Lee, his face turned to the square, was as yet unaware of the presence that was responsible for his present plight. For the moment it was just as well the shame was spared him.

But not for long did So Wo Loie pause. Once the situation burst upon her, she thought not of herself but only of him standing there in torture for her sake. The goddess and the protection that she had hugged so long she threw away with one mad gesture. Across the street she saw the butcher's stall, the fat butcher with whom she had lately haggled. There upon his block stuck the key that would unlock her lover's fetters. She sprang down from the porch and flew across the square, unmindful of the lingering stragglers of the crowd, and

even as Ho Fah Lee now caught sight of her she was at his side, the meat ax in her hand, hacking with all her might at the tough bamboo rods that held him.

"That for the mandarin," she cried, "and that, and that, and that!" punctuating each word with a sturdy blow.

The watchers gaped and stared, but no one tried to interfere. It was no concern of theirs if the mad woman risked her life; it was already forfeited, and even the mandarin might not assail her, though she did his authority. The bars about Ho Fah Lee's shoulders split and gave way. His sturdy shoulders helped them, then his arms were loose and his hands wrenched the frame from off his neck, and with a mighty heave he freed himself.

Already his sailors had sprung from the sampan, armed with boat hook and oars, forcing the frightened villagers back.

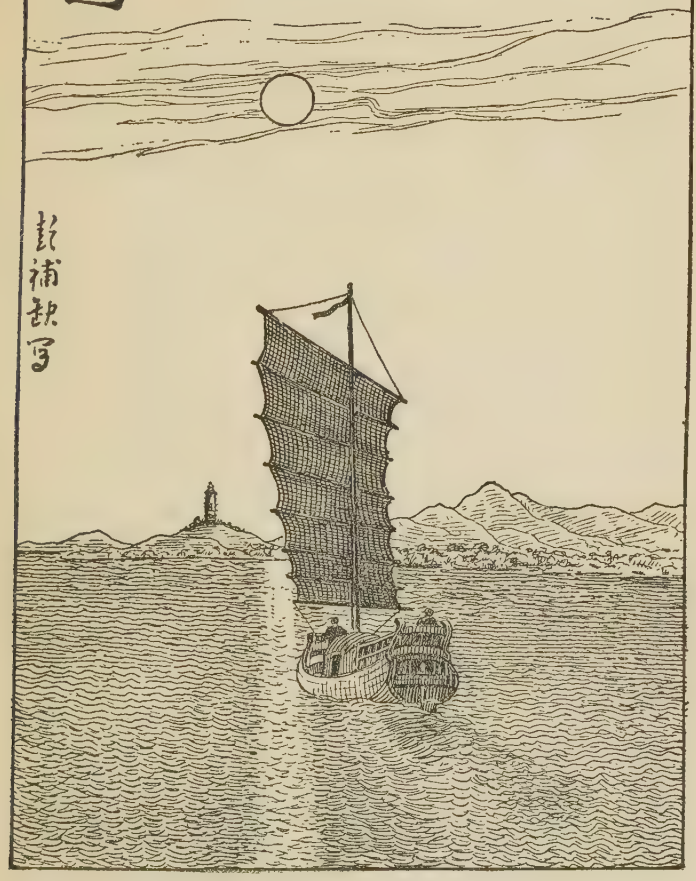
"The pirate's hands are free," cried Ho Fah Lee, seizing So Wo Loie, swinging her to his shoulders and running toward the dock.

Down the street the loitering lictors, attracted by the tumult, came running. They were met by the sturdy sailors, who fell upon them with oars and hooks, and as they slunk back, the men leaped into the sampan, shoved out from the dock and the next moment were widening the ripple of the path the full moon made.

The lictors looked about for a craft to follow

them, but none appeared on either side of the village. Li Sing, dropping on her knees, began to sob in quick relief, while old Wang Ho, now smiling broadly in the light of the full moon, remarked the beauty of the night, the rippling water and the bulking shadow of the junk, a love boat now, to breast the swelling current of the future.

月道 THE MOON PATH



THE MOON PATH

BELOW the Tiger Head, that sign of luck, far down and out upon the current of the river, the junk spread the moon path as it eased along. Behind, the chattering of the village died, and as the bend was passed, the lights went out, snuffed like a row of tapers by the rising bank. The ripples danced and murmured at the junk's side as if in gurgling laughter, a laughter only fit for lovers' ears.

The *yulohs* now creaked musically in the oarlocks as the men bent rhythmically to their work. The hoisted sail was trimmed to catch the breeze behind them, and though the night was soft, it came in a steady breath so that the junk, aided by it, ran on with almost the speed of the Foreign Devils' fireboats. The banks on either side drew back as though to give the craft more room, and, as if ashamed of what they saw aboard, a modest veil of filmy mist rose up to hide them, leaving the river empty of all save the swiftly gliding boat.

As the sail swung to on a long tack it revealed two figures standing against it, their shadows one against its lighted background, their faces turned astern. Ho Fah Lee, his arm holding So Wo Loie's yielding form close to his side, looked out across the dancing, shining waters, and then said low in her ear:

"My lucky day and yours, O Drouth Flower! The famine and your widowhood have dropped astern. 'What happens in Kwang Tung is not known in Famosa.' The moon path leads us to the Great Water across which lies my sea bird's nest of love."

So Wo Loie sighed happily and snuggled closer to him. Then her fingers fumbled in the bosom of her jacket. Her lover bent over her when she raised her face to his; then she lifted out the Red Cord, still with the knot tied in it, and held it up in the silver light.

"Into the moon path, O cord that binds me to the past," she cried, and flung it far astern into the glittering wake.

Ho Fah Lee laughed, then bent closer still and asked a question that long had puzzled him. "Who tied the knot in the Red Cord?"

She smiled up at him with a look that she might have borrowed from old Wang Ho, and answered quizzically,

"Ask the Goddess of Mercy."

THE END